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DRAGON®

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DRAGON®

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ON THE COVER: *Ben Wootten offers a cinematic reaction shot of investigators confronted by the monstrous villain of their mystery.*

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It's a Mystery

By Steve Winter

"The problem with putting two and two together is that sometimes you get four, and sometimes you get twenty-two."

—Dashiell Hammett, *The Thin Man*

John W. Campbell, the editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* and *Analog Science Fiction and Fact* who towered like a colossus over the golden age of science fiction, famously claimed that writing a science fiction mystery story was impossible. At any time, the writer could simply inject new technology or new discoveries into the story and zap! The mystery would be solved as if by magic.

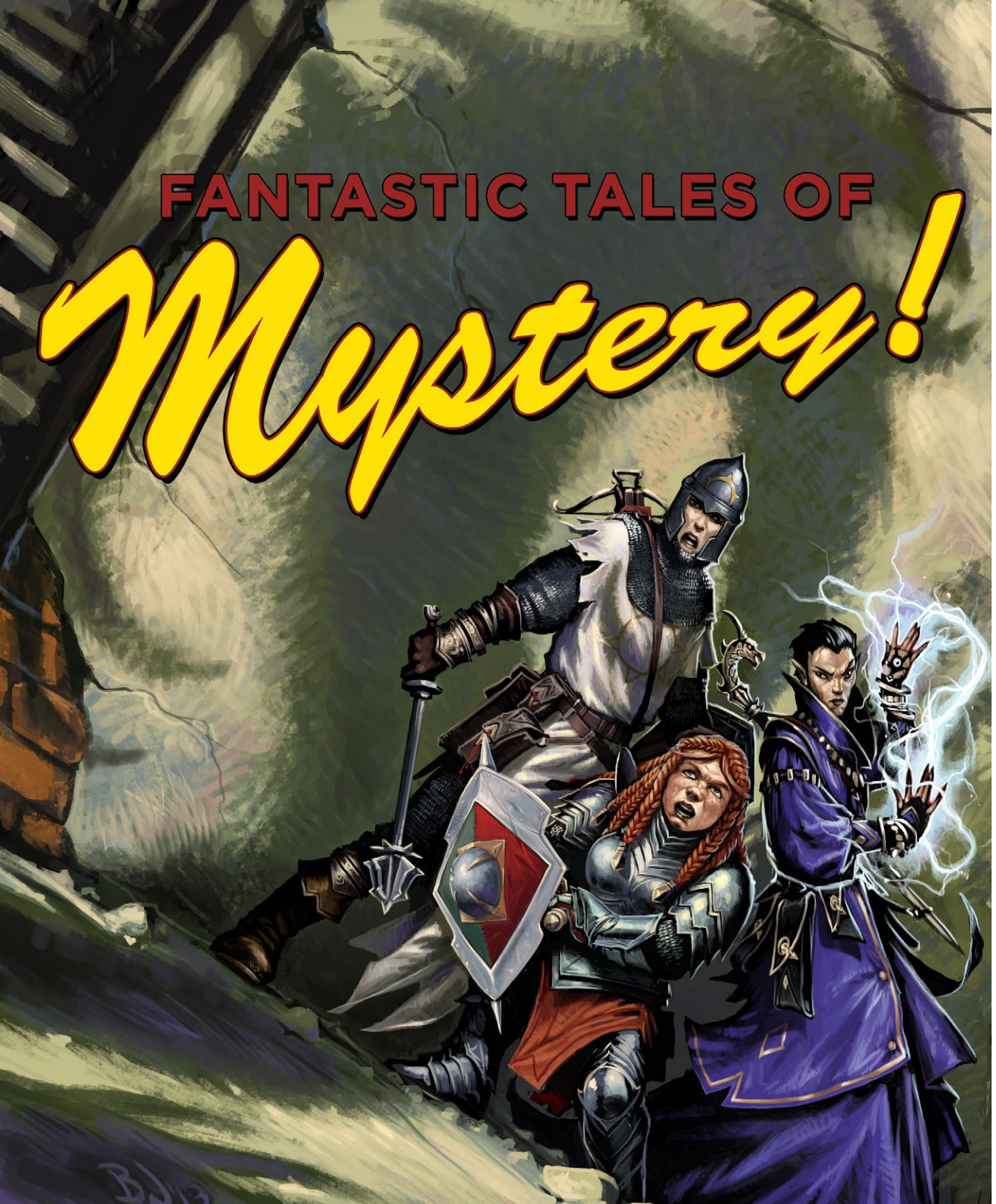
Needless to say, this assertion only spurred many writers, led by no less a luminary than Isaac Asimov, to write science fiction mysteries just to prove to Campbell that he was wrong. Asimov's novel *The Caves of Steel* is a noir-flavored science fiction murder mystery that rightfully earns every one of those adjectives. The story was so popular that Asimov wrote three sequels: *The Naked Sun*, *The Robots of Dawn*, and the short story "Mirror Image." The protagonists of *Caves of Steel*, detective Elijah Baley and his robotic partner R. Daneel Olivaw, were Asimov's two favorite characters. Since then, plenty more authors have followed in Asimov's footsteps. Modern readers can fill their book lists with nothing but science fiction mysteries, and their popularity has spilled over into movies and TV shows.

There was a time when, if you had substituted Dungeons & Dragons® for science fiction, I'd have agreed with Campbell's sentiment; I didn't believe it was possible to construct a convincing, exciting D&D adventure around a murder mystery. Magic was too intrusive. *Speak with dead* and other divinations would reduce most murder investigations to a simple spellcasting. Why bother investigating the murder at all—or even call it murder—when clerics at the local temple could restore the victim to life?

Needless to say, I was wrong, too; so wrong that we decided to devote a *Dragon* issue to demonstrating just how off-base I was. This is one case where I was truly happy to be proven wrong, because I'm a hard-boiled fan of detective stories and film noir. The illustration kicking off our feature article makes me happy every time I see it, as posters of Robert Mitchum and Jane Greer in "Out of the Past" and covers of *Dime Detective* magazine fill my head.

Of course, we can't just advise you to add mystery plots to your campaigns without giving DMs and players the tools they need to explore the genre. As the cornerstone, we have Adam Dray's detailed primer on how to make it all work. Shadowing that article are four character themes for budding investigators and gumshoes: the inquisitive, the spy, the vigilante, and the courtier. And since you can't have a crime without a crime scene, we've added a whole town's worth of mystery-worthy locales where criminals commit misdeeds, investigators scan for clues, and suspects lurk in shadows at the far corners of the room.

"The Improviser's Cheat Sheet" is an example of an unsolicited article that we discovered in the inbox and instantly loved. Admittedly, David Noonan is a seasoned professional who doesn't need to prove his chops to anyone. His approach to preparing for those little game events that inevitably arise in every session, yet we never seem ready for, is nigh on perfect.



Fantastic Tales of Mystery

By Adam Dray

Illustrations by Ben Wootten and Anna Christenson

Most D&D® adventures include mysterious elements: secrets that must be uncovered and villains who must be unmasked. But in a literary sense, they more closely follow the threads of action stories and thrillers. The mystery genre offers an experience noticeably different from the normal dungeoneering and adventuring routine. For a mystery scenario to succeed, the Dungeon Master and players need to make a few adjustments in their usual approach.

Mysteries come in many varieties, but when you say the word "mystery," most people think "murder." This article focuses on murder mysteries, but don't overlook other possibilities. Harry Dresden chases down clues using wit and magic in *The Dresden Files*. The television show *Supernatural* features a "monster of the week" plot, wherein the heroes Sam and Dean must discover what kind of beast they're dealing with before they can figure out how to defeat it. Many classic D&D quests, such as finding all the pieces of the *Rod of Seven Parts*, can fit into the mystery category if you play up the discovery component of the adventure.

Books, TV, and movies are good sources for inspiration, but take care. Readers and moviegoers are a passive audience; D&D characters are active agents

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who move in unexpected directions. Embrace that from the start, and everyone will have more fun.

The Basic Murder Mystery Framework

At its core, every mystery is a question in need of an answer. But there's more to it than that. A mystery is an *interesting* question—a puzzle with a difficult solution.

There are two kinds of murder mysteries. The first group includes those where the murderer is unknown and must be identified. In *A Game of Thrones*, someone nearly killed Bran by pushing him off the tower, and the Starks had to figure out who did it. Every episode of *Castle* revolves around this type of whodunit. The second group includes those where the murderer's identity is known but there's (seemingly) too little evidence to prove his or her guilt. Look at *The Wire*, where the police know who the drug kingpins are, but they can't just shoot Avon and Stringer Bell and call it a day. They need to build a strong case that will hold up in court. Adventurers in a monster-and-magic-filled D&D world don't always care about proof the way modern district attorneys do, of course, but they will if the perpetrator has powerful friends and allies, which is a standard feature of this type of mystery. To bring the powerful to justice, investigators must prove their case to an authority that is at least as powerful as the person they're accusing.

Beyond those two divisions, every murder mystery has a victim, a murderer, and a list of possible suspects and clues. Every murderer has *means*, *motive*, and *opportunity*: the means or ability to commit the crime, a motive or reason to commit this crime, and the opportunity to commit the crime. Other potential suspects have some combination of means, motive, and opportunity, too, and that's what makes solving the murder fun.

THE ODD NATURE OF DEATH IN D&D

Before diving into a murder plot, consider this: the Raise Dead ritual is available to 8th-level ritual casters, and it costs 680 gp (market price) to return a heroic tier character to life. That's the same as the purchase price of a 3rd-level magic item. Why spend a lot of money hiring a party of adventurers to investigate the murder if it's cheaper to bring the victim back to life?

At the very least, this puts a pretty firm ceiling on what people can pay the party to investigate. If they had 680 gp, they'd get the victim raised. It's unlikely a patron would pay more than 500 gp to investigate the murder of a heroic tier victim.

You have three options to deal with this problem. The first is to put the victim in a higher tier. Raising champion tier victims costs ten times more (5,000 gp material cost; 6,800 gp market price). Raising epic tier victims costs 100 times more (50,000 gp material cost; 68,000 gp market price). Those price tags might prevent a quick return to life and send people scrambling to bring the perpetrator to justice. It's unlikely that a 5th-level party can scrape together 6,800 gp to bring back a champion tier victim (6,800 gp is the suggested total treasure size for 8th level). You still must answer this question: Why doesn't this high-level victim have the gold for a Raise Dead ritual, or at least have wealthy friends?

Your second option is to create a physical reason that the victim can't be raised. D&D villains understand how easy it is to bring people back to life, so they can take measures to prevent resurrection and get away with murder. Under normal conditions, Raise Dead works only within 30 days after the victim's death. The Gentle Repose ritual extends that to 150 days, but only if Gentle Repose is performed before those first 30 days have expired. If the villain can prevent the corpse from being discovered for longer than 30 days, the victim probably is done for. A particularly diabolical murderer might develop a contrary version of Gentle Repose called Violent Decay that shortens a corpse's window for being raised to just one day, or one called Cut the Cord that makes it impossible for Raise Dead to work at all on a particular corpse. The fact that such a ritual was used is a clue in itself.

The last option is to create house rules for your campaign that change how Raise Dead and similar magic work. If you're planning a series of murder mystery adventures, it makes sense to make resurrection magic rare and costly in your setting. In a world where death is permanent, finding and stopping murderers becomes more important.

A Murder Plot Structure

Use this framework to construct your own murder mysteries.

The **hook** is what makes the characters care about this crime. Some heroes naturally want to do good and need no other reason, but a client with a bag of gold often motivates a group to get involved (down-on-their-luck investigators with bills due are a standard feature in hard-boiled detective stories). Kill a beloved nonplayer character, like the priest who gave the adventurers free healing or the rogue's elderly grandmother, and watch the group get very interested in finding the murderer. If you're running a mystery campaign, then perhaps the adventurers are the City Watch Homicide Unit. Most importantly, you need to look beyond the characters and make the players care. Appeal to their sense of justice or revenge.

The **investigation** is the discovery phase in which the characters chase down leads and talk to witnesses. They'll likely use their special abilities, including magic items and spells, to learn as much as they can. Some leads will be dead ends. The investigation narrows the possible suspects to a small number. If this is a "gather proof" story, the characters might figure out the murderer's identity here, but they'll need more evidence to make their case.

In the **shake-down**, the characters interrogate every potential suspect to see what else they can learn. They rattle the nerves of their suspects to force an error. A witness admits she's been holding back information. An accomplice admits his part in the crime and fingers the murderer—or is he lying? This part of the mystery is about the investigators using their abilities to wring more information from the clues they've already discovered.

The shake-down usually triggers **more investigation**. Information gleaned from suspects should generate new leads or reveal facts that invalidate earlier assumptions about means, motives, and opportunities, raising or lowering each suspect's likelihood of being the murderer. A suspect who was cleared earlier might end up back on the list again. Investigation sometimes uncovers evidence of other crimes, offering bait for further adventures. During this time, the criminal isn't just sitting quietly, waiting to be discovered. He or she is actively trying to foil the heroes by hiding evidence, silencing witnesses, and possibly even intimidating or hunting the investigators. Of course, all of those actions create additional evidence.

If all goes well, the mystery reaches a **revelation**. The investigators have chased down all the leads, interrogated all the witnesses and suspects, and should strongly suspect that they know who the killer is, if they aren't absolutely certain. This is the shining moment for the players, who have fought hard through conflicting clues to arrive at their conclusion and unmask the villain.

Everything leads to a **final confrontation**. This is good, old-fashioned D&D territory. Occasionally the villain might even say, "And I would have gotten away with it, too, if it weren't for you meddling adventurers!" Most of the time, the confrontation culminates in a huge combat scene.

Finally, the mystery ends with a **wrap-up**. The final confrontation probably revealed bits of information the heroes missed or didn't have access to before, so now they can assemble all the pieces of the puzzle. This is the perfect time for the villain to mutter a few final words in a dying soliloquy, exposing secrets and laying the foundation for further adventures.

Designing Your Mystery

The formula for designing a mystery is easy in theory: Start with a simple story and complicate it. Lay it down on a timeline and then check it to make sure every detail makes sense.

At the end of most mystery tales, when the entire plot has been laid bare, you see that the story was pretty simple at its core. Murderers don't need complex motives to make good adventures. Start with a simple crime driven by base emotions. A tale of jealousy, revenge, greed, or pride will resonate with your players. Since this is D&D, your villain is probably an evil sorcerer, a greedy thief, a scheming noble, a dastardly doppelganger, a bloodthirsty vampire, a jealous god, or something equally fantastic, instead of just a cheated business partner or indebted gambler. Villains need not be *monsters*, though. Monsters kill without caring whether people know. Murderers hide their crimes. They want to fit into society but they won't or can't play by society's rules.

After you have a basic crime plot, complicate it. Who knows about it? Are the witnesses willing to talk about what they saw? Why or why not? Murderers take all kinds of measures to hide their foul deeds. Think about what your villain did after the crime. Did he or she hide the body (or try to)? Did the villain use magic to conceal evidence? No crime is perfect, so consider what mistakes the murderer made along the way.

As with any adventure, you want to create memorable characters and locations. Liberally add magic and fantasy to the mystery. Don't be satisfied with mundane concepts, because D&D players expect a fantastic journey.

Build a Timeline

After you've brainstormed, start building a timeline. If your players are accustomed to using a fictional calendar, write down the day and time that everything happened. You don't need to use exact days in this case; 2 days ago, 5 days ago, and so on are just as good.

Your timeline needs four columns:

- When did the event happen? ("2 days ago")
- Where did the event occur? ("Troll Deeps")
- Who was at this event? ("Green Briar the Troll")

- What really occurred? ("Dragged off the bodies of the guards to eat them but left the corpse of the duchess untouched out of respect.")

List events chronologically from the earliest to the most recent.

The Where and Who columns will be useful to you later when the players are interrogating NPCs about what happened. You can scan your list for every instance of a character or a location and reveal the relevant information as answers.

If you build your timeline by starting with the basic murder plot, you'll probably end up with one or two locations, one or two people (at least the murderer and victim plus witnesses), and a handful of events. Write several more events to establish the murderer's motive, means, and opportunity. Add events for the murderer's planning of the crime. Maybe the murderer bought poison or commissioned an unusual spell scroll or magic item. Add events showing the murderer's cover-up. Maybe he or she framed someone else or dissolved the body in acid (not realizing that the victim's gold ring would not dissolve).

A universal rule of mysteries is that players chew through clues quickly, so you need to complicate the situation. Who else had motive to kill the victim? Add a few events that make someone else look guilty, and add witnesses who can come forward and point fingers at the wrong people.

Don't worry that you're being unfair by dirtying up the situation. It's not cheating to design a complicated monster encounter, and it's not cheating to design a complicated murder plot. In a mystery, the plot itself is a kind of opponent; it needs to be challenging. You don't want this to be too easy for the players. Their fun and their sense of reward come from the difficulty of sorting it all out. I've run adventures with as many as 25 events on the timeline, eight locations, and 23 NPCs (including suspects, victims, and witnesses), and players still solved the mystery in under 5 hours.

Put yourself in the shoes of the players. Where would you look first? Be sure that no single clue can wrap up the entire puzzle. It is necessary to shine at least some suspicion on the actual villain, but if it takes several connected clues to positively identify the killer, your players will get a better sense of accomplishment from solving the mystery. Remember the rule of three. If players collect three clues pointing to the same suspect, it's almost guaranteed that they'll fix on that suspect as the guilty party. A corollary rule is that if players have three clues of any kind, they'll try fitting them together into a conclusion, regardless of how much the pieces must be twisted and bent to make them fit. Until your players become experienced at solving mysteries, don't make them sit for too long on just one or two corroborating clues before providing the all-important, third clincher.

Build a Cast of Fascinating Characters

Keep a list of characters involved in your plot, including player characters who have connections to anyone involved in the murder. This cast of characters is a table with five columns:

- The character's Name.
- A quick description of that character's Role, both in society and in this mystery.
- The Motive the character had to commit this crime.
- The Means the character had to commit this crime, along with any evidence backing up those means.
- The Opportunity the character had to commit the crime. Where was the character when the crime happened? Does he or she have an alibi to counter this opportunity, and if so, who or what is it? Is the alibi true or a lie?

For most characters, the motive column is the most important—and the most work to fill in. That's why I place it before Means and Opportunity. Think beyond motive to *agenda*. What does the character want the world to know or not know? List every reason the character might have to commit the crime in question and every way in which that character might benefit from the crime. Then turn around and write what that person would say if those motives were turned into accusations. You don't need to write out their words—jot down the ideas in shorthand so you can recall them quickly while running the game.

As an example, here is a portion of the cast from a murder plot involving the killing of a duchess. Clues point at a tribe of trolls, but they are being framed by a shape-shifting nobleman who resents the duchess for forcing his family to give up its land as part of a treaty with the trolls.

Include victims and witnesses as well as suspects on this list. Anyone who has something fishy in the Motive, Means, and/or Opportunity columns is likely to be considered a suspect. Include anyone with a motive, however petty. Include everyone the investigators are likely to suspect, even if no evidence points their way (this is especially important if this is not your first mystery; players have a tendency to carry suspicions from one adventure to the next, like grudges). In this mystery, the body was torn by large claws, so the Means column listed the framed trolls, the actual murderer (a shapechanger), and also a local druid who frequently traveled in the form of a bear, actual bears from the nearby forest, and the leaders of a noble family whose crest prominently featured a bear.

Witnesses are often unreliable. They tend to see what they expect to see. They forget important details and imagine things they missed. They might have their own agendas, such as trying to gain revenge on old enemies by casting suspicion at them. They might be too afraid to talk at all, or to tell the truth. They

Name	Role	Motive	Means	Opportunity
Stone Canyon	Troll Chief	Has been fighting the duchess for decades; has made many threats and killed many of her soldiers.	Could easily kill the duchess and her guards if it caught them by surprise.	Lives near where body was found.
	Red Herring	In fact, had great respect for the victim as a warrior and leader. Also, doesn't want word to get out that troll blood can make resurrection gems. Hopes to figure out which of the PCs can be trusted with that secret.	Troll teeth and claws would inflict the types of wounds found on the victim.	Alibi: Other trolls say he was at a fire dance with them, but can you trust any troll?

might be so keen on getting paid for their information that they spice it up to ensure a sale. They might hate adventurers for obscure reasons and be hostile instead of helpful. Or they might seem very helpful but lead investigators astray with innocent or not-so-innocent agendas. Witnesses might secretly be sympathetic to the killer's cause or even allied with the murderer.

Nonplayer character experts can also be important sources of information. Don't assume that the characters have Sherlock Holmes-like encyclopedias of knowledge in their own heads that they can access any time with a few skill rolls. If the murder victim died from horrible claw wounds, investigators might gain valuable insights by talking to an expert on bears or trolls. Have the names of a few local sages or druids handy. After the characters are known to suspects, they'll need to hire spies or detectives if they want to keep tabs on the suspects' movements and activities; their own faces would be quickly recognized in a crowd. Local criminals tend to hear a lot of buzz about local crime, and someone in an adventuring party probably has useful underworld contacts. Most investigators will ask to talk to local bartenders, because bartenders tend to know everyone and hear everything. Characters might consult an oracle or a wizard to cast divining magic or to speak with the dead.

In all these cases, carefully consider what resources the adventurers can lean on for help. Each expert NPC should have a cost for information that could crack the mystery open. That cost might be money, but it could just as easily be time, rare spell components, favors, secrets, privileged information about suspects, and the like. NPC help can be slow and even unreliable. After all, there's a reason that the heroes are investigating and not these experts-for-hire. It's important, though, that most specialists be helpful. Otherwise, players will stop trusting them and never consult them again.

A special case in D&D murder mysteries arises when adventurers talk to the dead. If investigators can ask a victim who the killer was, the investigation will be quick and dull. In a world where such magic is common (or at least is not uncommon), murderers would take steps to avoid being directly accused by the deceased. (We return to this subject below.)

Are your characters compelling? Whenever you suspect an NPC is two-dimensional and boring, add more depth. Put yourself in each NPC's head. What motivates the character? Why did she do the things she did? In the mystery mentioned above, I originally envisioned the duchess as someone who had struggled for decades to make peace with the trolls, but that idea had to be thrown away. Instead, she became a warlord who united five noble families in battle against the trolls and beat the monsters back to the Deeps. When in recent times she called for peace, it was more believable that her former allies would feel betrayed by her change of heart toward the trolls and want to kill her. It also made it likely that the trolls might harbor deep resentments over the past wars and want her dead, clearing the way for someone to frame them for the crime.

Characters can also be guilty of unrelated crimes that the investigators uncover. If you're running a murder mystery campaign, you can plant the seeds for the next adventure by having NPCs scrambling to hide evidence. This makes them look suspicious, provides a red herring to complicate the actual murder discovery, and sets up the next game session.

Create Memorable Encounter Locations

A lot of what makes D&D amazing is the fantastic places where characters go. This applies to D&D murder mysteries, too. Make sure that the characters have interesting locations to visit during the adventure. It's likely they won't visit all of them, and that's OK.

In a murder mystery, a location can create a sense of wonder, evoke a specific mood like claustrophobia or nervousness, and deliver information about the setting. If you are "phoning it in," add a magical or fantasy element to your humdrum idea. For example, instead of introducing yet another warehouse full of indeterminate crates, design a warehouse that stores cages of wild animals and monsters. Replace a stereotypical dark alley with a creaky balcony on the 20th floor of the wizard's tower. The body of the duchess was originally going to be found outside a troll cave, but the cave turned into a sprawling web of underground canyon-caves where the rocky ground had cracked open, leaving the Troll Deeps open to the sky.

Expect the player characters to scour each location for clues. They will search for tracks, blood, signs that there was a fight, signs that there wasn't a fight, magical residue, witnesses, notes, burned notes, impressions from notes, and a hundred other things that pop into their heads. Your timeline presents much of this information already, but go back through it. Make a list of locations and note the evidence that can be found in each one. Spice up each location with additional tidbits. Here's where the rule of three really comes into play; you want multiple paths that lead to the killer, and that means multiple clues.

Consider what skills the characters can use to uncover clues. It's tempting to put a DC on each separate bit of information, but doing so creates a possible place where play can get jammed up. Instead, divide the clues at each location into two groups: those that the characters must find if they are to proceed, and those that they can find only with a successful skill check or by asking the right questions. The DC for finding these clues should always be at least moderate, and often hard. Encourage (or require) players to boost one character's skill check with the Aid Another action rather than allowing everyone to make their own skill check.

Note that the clues in the first group—those needed to proceed—aren't necessarily the most crucial clues at this location. They might do nothing more than point to another location, where characters will find clues telling them there's more to be found back where they started. But at least when the players' dice betray them—and they always do betray them, don't they?—the players do not leave the location empty-handed. They earn clues that lead them to further information. Avoid the players ever feeling like they have nowhere to look and nothing to follow up.

Much of the enjoyment in solving a mystery comes from the feeling players get when they figure something out with their own minds. Promote this as much as possible, and never stifle it. If characters ask

the right questions and look in the right places, they should get the right answers. If the murder weapon is hidden beneath the blacksmith's anvil and everyone just searches the room, then hard Perception checks are needed. If someone asks specifically to look beneath the anvil, then you might call for an Athletics check to move the anvil, but the Perception check should be an automatic success.

Challenge a Character's "Short-Circuit" Abilities

Adventurers have powerful rituals, magic items, and abilities that can make it easy to solve a mystery. Heroes can determine alignment, speak with the dead, locate important objects, even *wish* for the answer. This is the hardest problem you'll face when designing a D&D murder plot.

Strive to *embrace* the characters' special abilities, not thwart them.

Your biggest challenge in 4th Edition D&D is divination magic such as Last Sight Vision, a 2nd-level ritual that shows the caster the last moments of a corpse or skull's living existence, and the higher-level rituals that let characters ask open questions of extraplanar entities. Or, you know, Speak with Dead. "Who killed you, Elminster? Oh, OK. We'll go arrest him." Thank you for playing.

The best way to deal with these situations is to embrace them. Some rituals are costly. If a character can pay the cost, give that player his or her money's worth. Let powerful spells deliver important clues that provide real direction toward the villain. Make it clear to players before they pay the casting cost, however, that the information they gain will be indirect. No magic spell is going to identify the killer and teleport that murderer into a jail cell. Magic is a great tool, but the heroes still must work for their victory.

Even powerful magic should seldom directly identify the murderer. Divining rituals provide access to a special kind of witness, but like mundane witnesses, spiritual witnesses can be imperfect and unreliable. Right from the start, avoid inventing a mystery that can be solved by asking the corpse who the killer was. A corpse's response to the question "who killed you" probably is "I have no idea—I thought I was alone, and I was hit from behind." In a magical world, crimes that can be solved by speaking directly with the deceased are quickly solved that way, and adventurers don't become involved.

The ritual Inquisitive's Eyes, which transports the caster's senses back in time in the current location, won't reveal the killer's face if it was covered by a mask or a disguise or if the culprit was invisible. Consult Mystic Sages and Loremaster's Bargain let the caster talk to beings that are strange and powerful but not omniscient. Their answers can be helpful yet vague or focused on an unusual slice of the truth. Mystic sages are limited to knowledge that has been logged by some sage, somewhere; an unsolved murder hardly qualifies. Loremaster's Bargain is always a double-edged sword, because the entity being questioned is under no obligation to provide information. Answers must be enticed with favors, quests, or secrets of one's own, and the value of the entity's answers will be in direct proportion to the value of what the characters offer. It can also be colored by the entity's unique viewpoint. The ancient head of a celestial monastery, for example, might reveal only that "the murderer is not a holy man. He has not been to a place of worship in the last ten years."

If an object is an important key to the mystery, expect a ritual caster of 10th level or above to try Detect Object. Within the limits of the ritual, this is a fine way to locate a murder weapon, a hidden will, or any other item that's location can be narrowed down to a few hundred feet. When characters find the object, it provides more information that leads toward eventually finding their murderer.

When characters are powerful enough to cast the 26th level ritual Voice of Fate, they are probably searching for a frighteningly powerful murderer who is well versed in divining rituals. Such a villain takes steps to prevent being identified by magic. Perhaps the villain has cast his or her own rituals or is using a magical device to obscure magical knowledge. The Rituals Index is a handy aid for DMs who need clever ways for magical villains to hide their tracks.

Don't forget about your adventurers' magic items and special abilities. The ability to speak with animals, for example, can be very useful. Most animals won't be especially helpful, but they should provide a tidbit of information tailored to their special nature. A dog might note how someone smelled or something unusual that the villain had eaten recently. A rat might know about something interesting the murderer stepped in. A bird that flew over the murder scene might describe what the villain's helmet looked like.

If one of the player characters has the ability to call for divine intervention, you'll need to plan for that. This situation is most likely to arise in the epic tier, when epic-level villains also might call on unholy favor to hide their evil deeds. A deity should answer the player's call, but their answer might be, "An evil goddess is meddling here. I cannot interfere in this mortal affair without starting a divine war." Perhaps the gods or their agents are suspects themselves, and calling in divine favors too early might tip off the divine villain! If that's the case, make the risk clear to the players and see what they do. In any case, divine aid is rarely direct and seldom decisive, and it usually solves problems with bigger problems.

Running Your Mystery

You have a detailed timeline, a cast of unforgettable characters, and a map of challenging locations. Your players have gathered around the table and the dice

are out. You're ready to run this mystery adventure, but every Dungeon Master knows it takes skill to breathe life into a pile of notes. Here are some tips to get the most out of your murder mystery.

Don't Railroad Your Players

When the choices that the players make don't matter, they might as well not make decisions in the first place. Worse, when a group realizes that the DM's story is going to unfold a certain way no matter what a player does, they disengage and stop having fun. The game becomes more like watching a movie than role-playing a character.

Not railroading your players is even more important than usual in a mystery; it's a mystery, not "my-story." Getting to the end and discovering the villain is fun, but the real enjoyment for players comes from putting together the puzzle pieces by themselves.

It's OK to let the characters get lost and wander, at least for a while. There may be times when they seem aimless or stuck or even frustrated. That's OK, too. You can give them some hints, DM-to-player, but don't give them in-character information for free. Make them earn it.

Trust your prep. You've woven a tangled web of information and everywhere the characters go, they'll run into suspects, witnesses, and expert help. If they grow frustrated, have a helpful NPC give them a lead. "I hear you're looking for the old duchess's murderer. You might want to talk to the Olian Family. I'm not saying they did it, but they were pretty angry about the treaty the duchess signed with the trolls." Remind characters who have a methodical, analytical bent that murders can be solved step-by-step, by considering means, motive, and opportunity. Remind more aggressive characters that they could just shake the tree harder and see what falls out.

When you created the villains for your mystery, you gave them motives. If the villains and their henchmen see adventurers sniffing around too much, they might move against the investigators. Perhaps the adventurers receive an anonymous message from a nervous witness who agrees to meet them somewhere privately, but it turns out to be thugs who try to kill the heroes. Who hired the thugs? The nervous villain, of course, and the thugs themselves become a clue pointing back to the bad guy.

There's always a chance that a group might solve the mystery in thirty minutes. Then what? Congratulate them for being very clever players! Use the experience to hide the clues a little better for the next mystery. Avoid the temptation to tamper with the clues during play to make the game last longer. The players will figure out what you're up to and probably will resent it. Sure, there is an old tradition of fudging dice rolls to increase excitement and drama in D&D. Murder mystery games are a different kind of monster; the players don't necessarily expect everything to be fair and aboveboard, but they do expect the facts to be the facts.

Look for Ways to Create Conflict

The game needs regular tension and conflict to stay interesting. Regular doesn't mean constant. Keep one finger on the pulse of the game. If it gets slow for too long and the players are fidgeting, create a short burst of excitement with a chase or combat encounter or some other tense scene.

NPCs who have motives for murder don't need to be guilty to be opponents. No one likes being accused, rightly or wrongly. When characters meet potential suspects, those NPCs can be angry, surly, sullen, defensive, aggressive, even violent. What they're not likely to be, once they get the idea that they're under suspicion, is friendly or helpful. In a mystery, and especially in a noir-style mystery, everyone has secrets to protect and skeletons to hide, and they'll go to great lengths to keep their dirty laundry from view. As soon as an NPC acts as if he or she has something to hide, you can count on characters going to equally great lengths to ferret out the details. They will push, cajole, manipulate, and threaten people who probably are innocent of the crime under investigation to learn what's what. Some suspects will crack and spill everything they know; others will get riled up and resort to weapons and spells to protect themselves against what they consider an attack on their reputation, their integrity, or their well-being.

Raymond Chandler famously wrote in his introduction to *The Fine Art of Murder*, "When in doubt, have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand." Everyone loves a good fight! Create opportunities for brawls and chases and all kinds of nonlethal combat. If questions make a witness nervous, have that NPC bolt at the first sign of pressure from investigators. Characters can chase the NPC over the roofs of the city or through the sewer or straight into a tavern where friends will jump to that NPC's aid and cover an escape. Just because the characters are investigating a mystery doesn't mean you can't break out the miniatures and battlemats and let the characters do what they do best.

Clues can lead to side adventures, too. An important witness might go into hiding in a dungeon so that the heroes must explore the dungeon, deal with the monsters there, and find the witness before the dungeon denizens eat him. Or the perpetrator might be a wizard who lives in a dungeonlike domain that the heroes must overcome before they can capture the villain.

Finally, of course, the final confrontation begs for a good boss fight!

Mesh a Great Murder Mystery with the D&D Rules

Don't shy away from engaging with the rules.

The main tool for investigation should be the players' own brains. The next most important tool is the

skill check. The skill list bursts with useful tools for collecting and analyzing clues.

Perception is important for spotting certain kinds of clues, but don't rely on it exclusively or even extensively. See that every skill gets a workout. Thievery and Dungeoneering can be crucial for locating secret doors and hidden compartments. Heal can reveal tiny wounds on the victim's neck or the presence of toxins in bloodstains. Nature might be the skill that picks up traces of someone having hidden in the garden or having climbed a vine-covered wall. Finding an out-of-place tool on a wizard's workbench depends more on Arcana than Perception, just as noticing the demonic cult tattoo on a suspect's arm could be a job for Religion. Identifying that someone is tailing you through the city should be a function of Streetwise or Stealth. Bluff and Intimidate can be just as important as Diplomacy and Insight when questioning suspects and witnesses or trying to get inside restricted locations.

Don't set the difficulty class for skill checks too high. You want characters to find the clues, not to miss them. Keep in mind, however, that up to four characters can help on a fifth characters' skill check, for a bonus of +8. This type of cooperative skill check usually is better than allowing everyone to make their own checks independently; with five or six die rolls, someone is bound to succeed on a lucky roll alone, with or without sufficient bonuses.

Also remember to give players useful information even on a failed check. Reserve the best information for success, but don't shut the investigation down because of an unlucky roll. If characters look, they're bound to find the basic clues. You can assume that the characters are automatically good at the basics of investigation. Skill rolls should be reserved for going beyond the basics.

As an alternative, you can interpret a failed skill check not as a missed clue but as a clue that's gained at a cost. Maybe the characters attract unwanted attention with their investigation and must fight their way out of an unexpectedly dangerous situation, or perhaps the clue leads them into a trap. Maybe the characters find the clue but inadvertently destroy the evidence through clumsy handling; now they know the truth, but they can't prove it to anyone else until they find corroborating evidence.

More extensive skill challenges are useful, too, but don't turn the entire mystery into one. Reserve skill challenges for specific, well-defined problems, such as finding a known witness who has gone into hiding.

Use the quest rules to pass out experience points when the characters complete your mystery's challenges. Solving the main mystery is a major quest, obviously. If the party uncovers another crime, related or unrelated to the main mystery, solving that crime should be another major quest with its own experience reward. Each major clue that is uncovered and fully understood should also be rewarded as a minor quest. These quest rewards are especially important in adventures with few combat encounters.

Playing in a Mystery

If you sit on the player side of the DM screen, you don't have much to worry about. Do what you usually do: explore the setting, interact with NPCs, fight when necessary, and use your mind to assemble the puzzle pieces that you discover.

The most important shift in playing habits is that it helps to think like a detective. Write down what you learn and build a chart of each NPC's means, motive, and opportunity. Develop a timeline of events to show where everyone was at crucial times and to separate connection from coincidence. Be persistent, even stubborn. Most importantly, chase down every lead! Mystery writers and DMs like to conceal important clues inside trivial facts and seeming coincidences. Overlook nothing.

If you hit a dead end, go back over what you know. Revisit the crime scene and search for overlooked clues. Question witnesses and suspects again; maybe you missed something they said the first time, or maybe new questions will pop into your head the second time around. Phrase the questions differently and see whether they contradict their earlier story. Turn up the pressure and see who cracks. People make mistakes when they are scrutinized. Even if you don't know who is guilty, acting as if you do can drive the guilty party into action to cover their tracks. They might even come to you (and try to kill you, so be ready).

Use all the tools at your disposal. If you are a ritual caster, dig out those divining rituals. Buy rituals that you need but don't know. Question the dead. Talk to animals and ghosts and stone walls, if you can. Tap every skill on your character sheet. Comb your equipment list, especially magic items, for ways to uncover more clues. Consult NPC experts and hire low-level gumshoes to handle some of the mundane legwork if time is a factor. Develop your contacts among the local thieves' guild and street urchins, and then use them to keep an eye on things when you can't be everywhere at once.

Finally, don't be shy about letting the DM know when you're really stuck. It's OK to ask for help. The DM is keenly aware of which clues you've forgotten or overlooked. You might be closer to the solution than you think you are and just missing the forest because the trees are blocking your view.

That's how you'll reach the final payoff of these mystery adventures: putting down a really bad guy.

About the Author

Adam Dray became a man that summer day in 1980 when he put on the DM hat and guided his brother and friends through the *Keep on the Borderlands* and the *Caves of Chaos*. Since those days, he's edited a handful of independently produced story games and some third-party material for D&D 4th Edition. Now and then, he pulls out his original Moldvay Basic D&D book and takes friends on adventures to the Keep. Adam is a software development manager in Maryland, where he lives with his wife Stephanie, a national best-selling author and all-around beautiful person.

Crime Scenes

By David Noonan

Illustration by Jim Nelson

An effective crime scene can add a lot to your Dungeons & Dragons® campaign. It can convey atmosphere, thicken the plot, introduce memorable characters, and challenge the heroes with puzzles and the interrogation of suspects. The crime scene is a location and thus fits neatly into site-based D&D® adventures, but an event obviously happened there, so a crime scene is also a useful building block for an event-based adventure. Combining the two to make the crime scene come to life as both a location and an event provides an unforgettable D&D encounter.

Why Create a Crime Scene?

The purpose of a crime scene is twofold. First, it provides exposition. Every crime scene tells a story, whether poorly or brilliantly. If you have information you want the players to know, incorporating it into a crime scene is a good way to make it memorable. For example, if you're revealing the presence of a werewolf, then human footprints converging on a bloody corpse in the snow and wolf prints leaving that corpse tell the tale in a more organic, natural way than having an eyewitness blurt out, "She turned into a wolf and tore out his throat!"

While every crime scene tells an obvious tale, it may be lacking some information; after all, not every crime scene must have dozens of subtle clues scattered around. But there's nothing wrong with the obvious when your purpose is to deliver exposition. Everyone at the table will have more fun when you present that information in a meaningful context such as this. Think of the crime scene as an engaging wrapper for the information you're delivering.

But the obvious story may not be the true story, which leads to the second purpose of a crime scene: investigation. Present a challenge to the players by including information that is somehow obscured, whether literally (a bloody glove under the bed) or figuratively (the garrote used as a murder weapon is in plain sight, under glass, and is the royal ruby necklace).

Unlike the obvious story that the crime scene tells, the clues remain unidentified until the adventurers find ways to reveal them. For example, they might:

- Take a specific, unusual action (pulling the right book off the bookshelf)
- Notice something subtle (perhaps with a high Perception check)
- Use the right skill (such as Arcana to detect magical residue)
- Talk to the right person (using any of the social skills)
- Use magic (either from an item or as a ritual)

After the heroes find any of the clues, the crime scene's obvious story is either enhanced or subverted. An enhancement clue fills in the gaps and provides extra information about the obvious story. A ranger looking at the footprints in the snow, for example, might notice that one of the humans walked with a limp. If the victim didn't have a known leg injury, that clue narrows down the list of possible werewolves.

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But what if the ranger determines that one set of human footprints walked backward from the crime scene? That subverts the obvious story of "human meets victim, turns into werewolf, murders victim, and runs away in wolf form." Now a wolflike creature and a human (walking backward) have departed the scene, but neither left tracks to explain how they arrived (by air? with magic?). The true story is now odder and far more elaborate than the obvious one.

Building a Crime Scene

The list of possible crimes and locations is as vast as the list of possible villains and motives. Because murder is the most common crime in a D&D campaign, however, we'll spend more time on it than on other crimes. Murder is inherently dramatic, the stakes being literally life and death, and it allows for a wide range of motivations and obfuscations. Not every crime scene needs to be a murder scene, of course, but there's no denying the power of a mysterious corpse to get the players' attention.

The following crime scenes work well in most D&D campaigns.

Banquets

Also includes inns and restaurants.

The Obvious Story: Someone slumps over dead in the middle of a meal, the victim of a poisoning. Perhaps the victim turns purple and dies, spluttering, in the middle of a toast. Maybe the victim goes face down into the mashed potatoes. The obvious story is poison, and the death takes place dramatically in front of multiple witnesses, none of whom saw the killer.

The Clues: The first matter for would-be investigators to determine is what food or drink carried the poison, no easy matter if the poison took time to work. Multiple victims can make this clue easier to track (what did they all consume in common?) but might obscure the murderer's motive (who's the real target?).

After the source of the poison is known, the investigators can trace the poisoned food or drink back to its sources. Who served it? Who prepared the plate? Who made the food or beverage in the first place?

The nature of the poison itself may be a clue. A poison from a flower that grows only in Calimshan suggests a culprit from that region. A poison that causes the tongue to swell might be part of a revenge plot by someone who was wronged by the victim's careless words.

Another clue might emerge from observant witnesses. Did someone hand the duke a pepper shaker? Was a servant quick to clear glasses from the table, even though the queen was clearly choking?

Who's There: Dozens of witnesses are available, but they all saw the death and aftermath of the crime, not the act of applying the poison. Those witnesses can include fellow diners, wait staff, cooks, butlers, and the host, to say nothing of uninvited "dinner crashers." If the victim expired in suitably dramatic fashion, those witnesses probably caused their fair share of mayhem by fleeing the scene or otherwise panicking.

Twists: It doesn't need to be murder at mealtime. A jewel thief could abscond with the queen's necklace by some sleight of hand during ballroom dancing. A swashbuckling villain could swoop in and kidnap the crown prince during the seafood course.

Rowdy Taverns

Also includes alleys and bad neighborhoods after dark.

The Obvious Story: A booze-fueled brawl breaks out in a time-honored fashion, and when it's all over, someone's lying dead on the floor. In such a confused, chaotic fight, perhaps no one saw the moment of the murder.

The Clues: One key question that investigators will want to answer early: Was the murder central to the brawl, or did the killer just take advantage of the chaos? The answer to that question will suggest the killer's motive.

A second category of clues involves the murder weapon, if it can be found, and the nature of the victim's wounds. Those clues narrow the list of culprits in the melee. The spear-wielding halfling probably didn't crush the dome of the half-orc's skull. The wavy-bladed dagger left behind suggests that the Green Serpentine cult was involved.

Finding clues in this crime scene can be difficult, because any proper tavern brawl includes a lot of property damage. Sifting through the broken bottles, smashed furniture, and orc-shaped indentations in the walls is part of the fun, and clever investigators can reverse-engineer the battle by carefully analyzing the wreckage.

Who's There: This crime may have had witnesses, but they may not have stuck around after the brawl. Further, the witnesses who are available may have been drunk, concussed, or still angry, which makes them more entertaining but less useful as witnesses. The most reliable witness is the bartender, who was probably sober, probably knows the customers, and is probably still around now that the fight is over.

Twists: Nothing says "guard bait" like a brawl among drunkards, so this crime scene might be nothing more than a distraction to draw the town watch away from the real crime being committed elsewhere. Nevertheless, finding out who started the fight might point to the mastermind behind the larger scheme.

Warehouses

Also includes docks and ships at sea (with some adaptation).

The Obvious Story. Warehouses are natural locales for property crimes, so the obvious story is usually focused on "something is missing" or "something unexpected is here." If something is missing, then the crime scene is fundamentally about theft. If the crime scene contains something unexpected, then the underlying crime might be theft ("we found

the stolen goods!"), smuggling ("these crates are full of contraband!"), or even murder ("these crates have bodies in them!").

The Clues: The condition of the crates often tells investigators something about the culprit. Crowbar scratches suggest humanoid criminals, claw marks mean something monstrous, and a lingering smell means troglodytes from the local sewers.

More subtly, the untouched, ordinary crates nearby can offer a clue. Dockworkers tend to follow a scheme when putting cargo into a warehouse, and studying the other crates can tell investigators when crates arrived at the warehouse. Especially in a theft situation, what the thieves didn't take is as much of a clue as what they did. Why would the thieves move crates of rare spices out of the way to get to the less valuable bundles of silk?

Smart characters will look for manifests or other paperwork, everything from labels on the crates to shipping records in the office. The mercantile world runs on paperwork, and ledger entries can be as decisive a clue as a bloody fingerprint.

Finally, the warehouse perimeter is a good place to put clues. By definition, warehouses hold valuable things, so getting into a locked warehouse takes effort that often leaves clues behind. Traditional clues such as fingerprints, broken windows, picked locks, and ropes dangling from the skylight work well here.

Who's There: Warehouse crimes generally don't have witnesses, but warehouse workers are often around, and they may have been the ones who discovered the crime scene in the first place. The warehouse landlord and the owner of the warehouse's contents—perhaps the same person, perhaps not—will often rush to the scene to assess the damage. And if they don't, that's a clue, too.

Twists: A warehouse full of spices and textiles from far-off lands is one thing, but consider warehouses and other storage areas with more exotic contents. What if the warehouse holds a menagerie of exotic monsters held in suspended animation? Or the parts of an orrery that, when assembled, allows planar travel? What if the "warehouse" is actually the inside of an extra-large *bag of holding* or *portable hole*?

Laboratories

Also includes artisan workshops.

The Obvious Story: Laboratories are good places for theft crime scenes and murder crime scenes. In both cases, the crime should somehow intersect with the work in the lab at the time. Maybe the wizard was murdered in her lab because of what she was working on—or even *by* what she was working on. In either case, if the characters understand the work being done in the lab, they'll understand the crime connected to it.

The Clues: Laboratories and workshops are full of strange ingredients and obscure tools—the sorts of things that make the city watch shrug and move on. Character skill checks can reveal the purpose behind the lab equipment, or the investigators can seek out sages or other experts, setting up future roleplaying encounters.

If magic is involved, the Arcana skill might reveal residue left behind after powerful magic, or it might determine the purpose of any magic wards still active in the lab. The same is true of Nature for natural ingredients that an herbalist or alchemist might use or Religion if deity worship is involved.

Anyone smart enough to experiment in a laboratory is smart enough to keep notes, and those notes can be an important clue. (If the investigators find no notes, that's a clue, too—did the killer abscond with them?) Notes might be encoded, written in a language foreign to the investigators, or merely cryptic, so the characters have to work a bit to figure out what they mean.

Who's There: The owner of the lab is often the victim, so any bystanders are servants, guards, or colleagues. All have varying perspectives on the lab owner and perhaps contradictory narratives. Those who work on strange experiments in eldritch laboratories are often eccentric themselves, giving you opportunities for memorable roleplaying.

If the victim was an assistant, that raises many questions of its own. Many investigators will assume there was a mistake by the killer, but that doesn't need to be the case. Answering the question of why an assistant was targeted instead of the master can lead to all sorts of interesting twists.

Twists: The wizard's lab is relatively easy to imagine, but what about a psion's laboratory? Could sentient crystals on the shelves be "witnesses" to the crime? Or might a lich's laboratory have an extradimensional space inside the phylactery?

Finally, in a high-risk environment like a magic laboratory, it's relatively easy to commit a crime and make it look like an accident. Was there truly a flaw in the summoning circle? Did Igor honestly confuse the blackcap and bluecap mushrooms?

Libraries

Also includes offices and archives.

The Obvious Story: Libraries are similar to laboratories in that the crime is often connected to the activity, which in this case is reading. The information in the library is somehow intertwined with the crime.

The Clues: The best clue in a library is the book at hand when the murder took place. Unless the criminal disturbed or stole the book the victim was reading, the investigators not only know which book the victim wanted information from but exactly what page he or she was reading. Re-creating a few pages from that book provides a useful handout for the players, and it's easier to prepare than, say, the tools and ingredients from a laboratory.

Another clue in a library is missing books. The criminal might want to keep some information secret, and directly taking books out of circulation is a good way to accomplish that. Even if the characters can't

locate the books themselves, knowing the titles and authors of the missing works is a solid clue.

Some libraries, especially those that allow lending, keep records of which patrons have read which books. This is a potential gold mine of clues for investigators because those lists reveal a lot about the personalities, interests, and motivations of the readers.

Who's There: Librarians often know as much about the subjects in the books as the library patrons, so they might have a wealth of information on obscure (but relevant to the investigation) topics. They're also notorious for caring more about the books than about the patrons, so characters might have to gently explain how the High Sage's murder is a higher priority than his overdue library books.

Twists: A library is a quiet place, so the crime committed there should somehow speak to that silence. You can adhere to the expectation of a quiet library by having a stealthy assassin commit the crime or flout that expectation with loud assailants like harpies or destrachans.

Shops

Also includes guild halls and some craft workshops.

The Obvious Story: A murder in a shop raises an obvious question of motive: Did the assailant kill the shopkeeper as part of a robbery, or was murder the intention and the robbery just a convenience or distraction?

The Clues: Anything missing from the shop is certainly a clue, and if the shop is ordinarily kept tidy, absent goods will be apparent. The method of murder is often obvious and directly connected to the shop: Bakers can be thrown into their ovens, tailors might be suffocated by their own cloth, and a sword-maker's corpse will not be a pretty sight. Further, the shop hours may help investigators narrow down when the crime occurred.

But the best clues come from the shop's customers, many of whom have an established relationship with the victim and can describe the shop's usual routines.

Who's There: Many D&D shops have a single proprietor, but there may be co-owners, clerks, or apprentices present. Unless the shop is obviously closed, a steady stream of shocked, nervous, or oblivious customers is almost a certainty. Interviewing those customers is at the heart of the crime scene investigation.

Twists: The essential twist for the shop as a crime scene, especially in the "robbery gone awry" scenario, is when what looks like violence by a stranger turns out to be committed by someone familiar to the victim. The culprit could be a customer, a vendor, a business associate, a "business associate" (organized crime), a rival shopkeeper, or an employee. The shopkeeper is naturally at the center of a web of relationships, any of which can motivate the crime.

Temples

Also includes wilderness shrines and cult hideouts.

The Obvious Story: A temple crime scene usually tells one of two stories: Either a worshiper finds a murdered priest or a priest finds a murdered worshiper. The trappings of the scene often include some religious significance. For instance, the murder happened atop the sacrificial altar, or it happened when the faithful were supposed to be away on a holy pilgrimage.

The Clues: Beyond the usual crime-scene clue hunting, investigators will look at the story of the crime through a religious lens, and that might reveal some truths about the criminal's motive or method. Investigators will ask whether the victim was living in accordance with the deity's commandments. A worshiper who's falling short of the religious ideal suggests certain suspects, while a worshiper who is on the straight and narrow suggests others.

Religion is an obvious skill for characters to use at this crime scene, but it's not the only one. History can reveal whether there's past precedent for the crime and whether it mirrors something in history, folktale, or myth. Arcana can reveal details of magic that was used, and whether that magic is part of the religious experience, part of the murder, or both.

Who's There: Worshipers who are present may view a crime scene through the lens of their own faith. A worshiper of a justice god, for example, may have a hard time conceiving of a death as murder and not the god's divine judgment. A religion that includes blood sacrifices may have worshipers who wonder whether the death was somehow self-inflicted or preordained.

Priests may be more concerned about the living worshipers and maintaining orderly services than they are about the dead abbot in the choir loft. They might worry, however, that they're next on the hit list because the murderer is someone with a grudge against that particular religion.

Both worshipers and priests will find a crime scene at the temple unsettling, more so than one elsewhere. Many faiths regard the temple as a place of sanctuary, and a dead body certainly reveals it as unsafe.

Twists: The investigators will likely leap to the conclusion that a murder in a temple has a religious motivation, but priests and their worshipers have outside lives every bit as rich as those who are less religious. A spurned mistress, a vengeful rival, an estranged family member—all can be killers, but none has an obvious connection to the faith of the priestly victim.

Don't make the religious angle completely irrelevant, however. If the temple doesn't directly relate to the motivation behind the crime, build a thematic connection between the crime and the worship. A high priest of the sea god who drowns in a temple font has thematic significance, even if the crime has nothing to do with the sea god. A similar theme applies to a worshiper of the sun goddess who's killed during an eclipse.

Stables

Also includes barns and wilderness locales (with some adaptation).

The Obvious Story: Someone died here, but the only witnesses are the horses or other animals in the stable—and it's hard to question a horse.

The Clues: This is a case where a ritual caster who knows Speak with Animals can cut to the chase and treat the horses or other creatures like conventional witnesses. That's an opportunity to reward smart ritual use—and the not-to-be-missed chance to roleplay a horse. Investigators who don't use Speak with Animals can still make inferences based on the animals' behavior, either now (the horses seem skittish) or earlier (the horses were whinnying shortly after midnight, the farmer remembers).

A stable is also a good place for ordinary clues like footprints and signs of a struggle. If the inhabitants of the stables are penned in, they won't have disturbed the crime scene.

Who's There: Investigators can expect the usual array of livery servants, stable hands, and so forth, but the actual denizens of the stables are often the only ones who were present at the moment of the crime.

Twists: A stable of carnivorous creatures poses two additional problems for investigators. First, the creatures may be dangerous enough to make combat at the crime scene a real possibility. Second, the stabled creatures may have committed the crime (probably at the behest of the real villain) or consumed the victim's body afterward. That may be a surprise to the ritualist using Speak with Animals: "The old man? He was delicious."

CLUES FROM CLUE

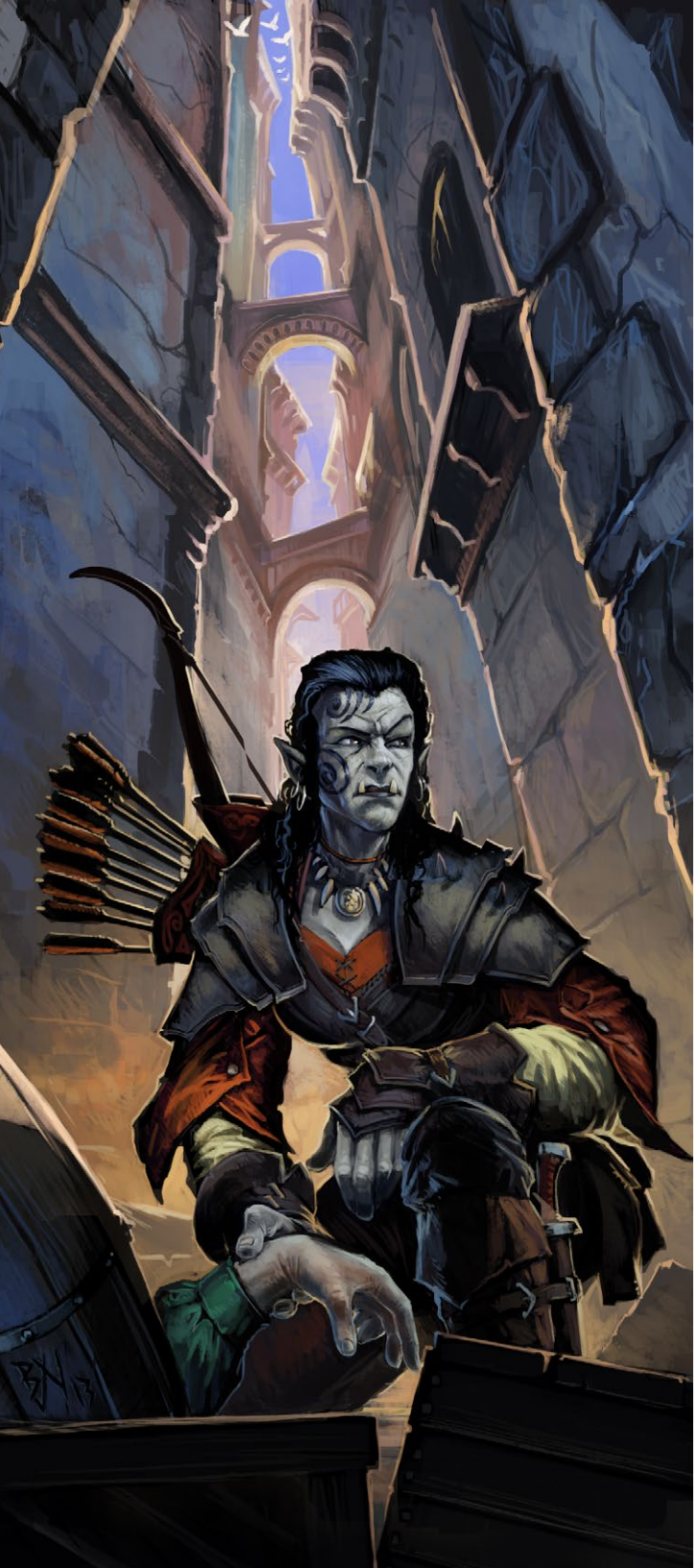
The CLUE® board game randomly matches crime scenes, murder weapons, and culprits ("Professor Plum in the conservatory with the candlestick!"). But to make your crime scene come alive, don't settle for arbitrary places or murder weapons. Let them fit the crime directly or thematically.

A direct connection to a crime scene is simple. Someone murders the chef in the kitchen because she spends every waking hour there. The king's executioner gets hanged with the same rope he used to execute the rebels last month.

A thematic connection is subtler, but it can be just as rewarding for perceptive players. Perhaps the victim was killed with a wrench because she was always meddling and trying to "fix" things that weren't her concern. Or the murder happened in the conservatory because the victim was trying to "orchestrate" a lasting peace between two factions.

About the Author

David Noonan designed dozens of 3rd Edition and 4th Edition D&D products. By day, he plays games when he's not writing. By night, he writes when he's not playing games.



Character Theme: The Inquisitive

By Tim Eagon

Illustration by Ben Wootten

When a merchant wants to know which employee is stealing from her, or when a nobleman wishes his wastrel son located, or when a farmer's wife needs evidence of her husband's infidelity, it's time to hire an inquisitive. These private detectives use a combination of skill, intuition, well-placed informants, and magic to solve crimes, locate missing persons, and unearth sensitive information. In short, an inquisitive is the perfect career for an adventurer.

This article introduces the inquisitive character theme, which is ideal for characters and campaigns that focus on intrigue, mystery, and crime fighting. The image of a hard-boiled inquisitive pursuing criminals on the mean streets of Sharn is iconic to the Eberron® campaign setting, but it's easy to adapt this model to other worlds. The theme can encompass so many related archetypes, from erudite sleuths in the vein of Sherlock Holmes to jaded watch investigators and even to crusading journalists. Whatever the case, the life of an inquisitive is not for the faint of heart. It involves long hours, unsavory characters, and frequent danger.

The Job

Most inquisitives labor as private detectives, operate in urban areas (although their investigations can take them far afield), and work alone or with a small group of close associates. Those in larger cities, however, sometimes band together to form detective agencies or professional guilds. Such agencies might employ one to four inquisitives, as well as support staff such as alchemists, sages, and diviners. The larger and most successful organizations might have over a dozen detectives and numerous other operatives. Inquisitives who work independently or in smaller towns might operate out of taverns, restaurants, or even their own homes.

Because the profession is not legal or welcome in every jurisdiction, inquisitives can have a complicated relationship with local law enforcement. Some watch commanders and local constables view inquisitives as necessary evils, despite keeping several

CHARACTER THEMES

Your character's theme is a career, a calling, or an identity that describes who he or she is in the world. Just as race and class provide basic definitions about who your character is, a theme adds a third component to help refine your story and identity.

For information on using themes as part of character creation and rules for how to gain and use theme powers and features, see "Heroes of Nature and Lore" in *Dragon* 399.

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on retainer to investigate complex or high-profile crimes. Overwhelmed subordinates can have a much more pragmatic view. Thus, a successful inquisitive cultivates reciprocal relationships with low-ranking officers and watch members, since they're an excellent source of jobs, information, and favors.

Inquisitives perform a wide variety of services that can be grouped into three broad categories: criminal investigation, crime prevention, and information acquisition. Most inquisitives will take on any such cases. Some inquisitives and their agencies, however, especially those located in larger cities, specialize in a particular field. To solve cases, inquisitives utilize magic and skills to analyze evidence, conduct surveillance, interview witnesses, interrogate suspects, and obtain privileged information by using a network of informants.

Criminal Investigation: Inquisitives investigate crimes ranging from petty theft to murder that official law enforcement is unwilling, unable, or ill equipped to handle. Indeed, many of the victims, who are often poor or otherwise marginalized, are suspicious of the watch due to corruption, discrimination, or their own criminal history. Wrongfully accused clients or their families might hire inquisitives to prove their innocence. Sometimes inquisitives are better suited to conducting an investigation because they're likely to have the necessary experience and resources, such as access to divination rituals. City watches often hire inquisitives (both officially and unofficially) as investigators or consultants when confronted with difficult cases, especially those involving magic, the supernatural, or the crossing of jurisdictional boundaries.

Crime Prevention: Thwarting crime before it happens is an extremely lucrative endeavor, since those who can afford these types of services are usually quite wealthy. Such activities include mundane background checks, foiling blackmail or extortion schemes, preventing industrial espionage, and uncovering assassination plots. The work is surprisingly dangerous because the wealthy tend to have powerful and well-connected enemies who don't take kindly to inquisitives poking around.

Information Gathering: The majority of cases undertaken by inquisitives involve the acquisition or recovery of embarrassing, lost, or secret information. People hire inquisitives to uncover evidence of adultery, locate missing family members, dig up dirt on enemies, and evaluate potential business opportunities.

Additional Services: Crooked inquisitives also engage in all manner of questionable or criminal activities, such as campaigns of harassment, strike-breaking, sabotage, blackmail, and even murder. Furthermore, many outwardly respectable agencies provide such services for the right price.

Creating an Inquisitive

To be successful, an inquisitive needs to be analytical, devious, quick-witted, perceptive, sociable, and handy in a fight. As a result, the profession attracts those who excel at many skills and are proficient in close-quarters combat, such as assassins, bards, rangers, and rogues. In addition, scholarly folk such as wizards and psions, especially those who can influence the actions and thoughts of others, make excellent inquisitives, given their magical talents and breadth of knowledge. Being able to perform rituals or brew alchemical concoctions is also a boon.

Inquisitives come from all walks of life and can be a member of any race. Since disguises are a useful trick of the trade, shapeshifting races such as changelings and hengeyokai have an obvious advantage, and many work in the profession. In Eberron, most inquisitives are human, half-elf, or half-orc (reflecting the heritage of the dominant dragonmarked houses), but goblins, who make up much of Khorvaire's urban underclass, often work as inquisitives in their own neighborhoods, which suffer from neglect by local law enforcement.

Starting Feature

An inquisitive's greatest asset is his or her network of contacts and informants. They act as eyes and ears for the inquisitive, thus enabling him or her to gain access to information not otherwise available. In addition, they can provide invaluable assistance in an investigation, such as discounts on needed equipment or access to the right people and places. A motley assortment of petty criminals, adventurers, ex-convicts, priests, street urchins, artisans, barkeeps, itinerant peddlers, lowly bureaucrats, watch members, merchants, shopkeepers, soldiers, professionals, and even other inquisitives comprise these networks. Such folk help for a variety of reasons: money, friendship, fear, ideology, nationality, and a sense of obligation are but a few. Some, however, help to further their own agendas.

Benefit: Work with your DM to build a small network of contacts—three to five individuals. It takes 2d6 hours for your contacts to respond to your requests, so you can turn to your network for help only once per day. Your contacts aid you as long as doing so does not pose a significant risk to them.

Your DM decides whether your contacts can and will help you, and if their help is valuable. If your DM determines that your contacts cannot help you, you learn that fact within 1d4 hours, and you don't expend the use of this feature.

When your contacts aid you, choose one of following benefits.

- A +4 power bonus to one knowledge check, Streetwise check, or any other check the DM decides the contact can aid you with. If you succeed on the check because of your contact, you receive the desired information from the contact.

- A 10 percent discount on the listed price of one item or service. Mundane items and services are readily obtainable at this discount, but your DM determines the availability of anything costing more than 50 gp.
- Minor aid or insight, such as leaving a side door unlocked, introducing you to someone, or providing you with the name of a local fence.

Additional Features

As you gain levels and work the trade, your network of contacts should expand. Be sure to ask your DM when you think another character can be a part of your network in the future.

Level 5 Feature

You can easily tell when people are trying to deceive you.

Benefit: Whenever you make an Insight check, you can roll twice and use either result.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Every inquisitive has an inquisitive's kit. This kit includes several containers made from different materials, brushes, mundane dusts, tweezers, picks, probes, a magnifying glass, ink and quills, parchment, and a small journal. An inquisitive's kit grants a +2 bonus to Perception checks to search an area for something specific. If you ever lose the kit, it costs 40 gp to replace.

Level 10 Feature

Between your acute senses, ability to read body language, and ever-expanding network of informants, no one can get the drop on you.

Benefit: Whenever you make a Perception check, you can roll twice and use either result.

Optional Powers

Inquisitives need to hone their skills and develop their minds to succeed and survive.

Level 2 Utility Power

Trailing a suspect without being spotted is a basic skill that every inquisitive masters.

Inquisitive Shadowing Inquisitive Utility 2

You can follow your target right up to its doorstep without it ever noticing you.

Encounter
Free Action **Personal**
Trigger: You make a Perception or Stealth check opposed by another creature and dislike the result.
Effect: Reroll the Perception or Stealth check and use either result.

Level 6 Utility Power

Reason is a potent tool that allows you to deduce critical information from disparate clues.

Inquisitive Intuition Inquisitive Utility 6

You turn over each piece of information in your head before a flash of insight lets you see the bigger picture.

Daily
Free Action **Personal**
Trigger: You make an Insight, Perception, Streetwise, or knowledge check and dislike the result.
Effect: Resolve the check as if you had rolled a 20.

Level 10 Utility Power

As a master inquisitive, you are at the pinnacle of your profession. When you walk into a room and focus, you can tell when any object is out of place while recalling obscure facts concerning whatever you are observing, which is nearly everything.

Inquisitive Awareness Inquisitive Utility 10

Nothing escapes your notice.

Daily
Standard Action **Personal**
Effect: Until the end of the encounter, or until you take damage or make an attack, you gain blindsight 1 and a +5 power bonus to Perception, Insight, and knowledge checks related to anything you can sense within 10 squares of you.

A Sample Network

Several example informants are provided here. You can use them directly in your game or as inspiration when creating informants of your own.

Farrig: An unusual informant, Farrig is the ghost of a half-orc laborer who died during the construction of city hall. He has haunted the building ever since, although few are aware of his presence. The secretive ghost entertains himself by eavesdropping on conversations, and he's more than willing to reveal what he overhears in exchange for a friendly chat about the outside world.

Sergeant Alandra Goldaxe: A laconic dwarf who has served in the city watch for decades and is nearing retirement, Alandra hates her newly appointed and much younger superior. She thinks he's an incompetent bootlick, and worse, he's replacing veterans like her with unqualified dolts. As a result, she has reluctantly taken it upon herself to rectify the situation by "deputizing" inquisitives to get the job done right.

Shifty: Few know this paranoid gnome's name, so he's simply called Shifty. His nickname originates with his habit of nervously shifting his eyes behind

his oversized magnifying spectacles. He is an expert forger with over a hundred aliases who works out of a nondescript shack. Renowned for his flawless counterfeit documents, he can readily identify fakes at a glance. Shifty loves challenges and gladly helps anyone who brings him such a forgery.

Dorvush Tor: A hulking dragonborn, Dorvush is an ex-gladiator who now trains warriors at his sprawling estate. He maintains connections with many of his former comrades and students as well as with the local gambling underworld. Dorvush is an avid collector of exotic weaponry and is more than willing to share his expertise. He assists inquisitives because he lost a prized protégé in a mugging and no longer tolerates crime.

Hemidra Vale: Hemidra, a half-elf, works as a barmaid and singer at a local tavern. Adventurers and criminals alike frequent the tavern, so Hemidra often overhears illicit information. In addition, she's not above manipulating patrons to loosen their tongues. Hemidra is desperately searching for her missing twin sister, so she'll disclose whatever she learns with anyone willing to aid her search.

Inquisitives in Eberron

Inquisitives originated in the Eberron campaign setting and remain closely associated with it. The detectives of that world, who are based on the protagonists of pulp detective stories and film noirs from the 1930s and 1940s, operate at all levels of Khorvairian society and with varying degrees of legality. Each inhabits a shadowy world of crime, corruption, and vice; in fact, some are little better than criminals themselves. Dragonmarked houses, especially House Medani and House Tharashk, have long dominated the profession, but independents can easily make a living if they're willing to engage in unseemly and sometimes illegal activities.

DMing an Inquisitive

If one of your players wants to play an inquisitive, consider a couple of things. First, you should collaborate with your players when creating NPCs to serve as informants. The sense of shared ownership makes interactions with them more meaningful and allows your players to immerse themselves further in their characters and your campaign. Begin with a handful of informants and add more as needed. It can be useful to jot their information down on note cards for future reference. When creating an informant, consider some of the following qualities: name, appearance, personality, occupation, contact protocol, and specialty. Second, an inquisitive requires a cooperative DM. You shouldn't view informants as a threat to your plots but as an opportunity instead, since they are a great way for you to present quests and plot hooks, introduce new NPCs, and nudge your players back on track.

If your player uses informants to answer questions likely to short-circuit your plots, however, resist the temptation to deny them information altogether. Instead, think of what the informants could reasonably know and then dole out the information as clues to point the player in the right direction. For example, if a rakshasa has replaced one of Sharn's city councilors, no one is likely to know, but a maître d'hôtel at a swanky Skyway restaurant may have noticed that Councilor Javan Tomollan now prefers his meat extremely rare. Of course, there are times when an inquisitive's informants cannot provide any help at all, and players should accept that eventuality.

Finally, while the life of an informant can be dangerous, you should avoid constantly threatening or killing them. Doing so has a mechanical impact on an inquisitive's abilities, and overdoing it is hackneyed. Only consider it if the character's actions actually jeopardize an informant's life or if it could be important to the inquisitive character's story. Then, make sure the inquisitive character gains a replacement contact as soon as possible.

Inquisitives arose from practices developed over centuries by the dragonmarked houses, primarily for the nobility of Galifar. By the end of the Last War, inquisitives had become commonplace, at least in urban areas. The dragonmarked houses never relinquished control of the industry—indeed, the majority of inquisitives today are affiliated with either House Medani's Warning Guild or House Tharashk's Finders Guild, although every house employs at least a few inquisitives of its own. For instance, House Sivis retains gnome inquisitives who specialize in investigating forgery and fraud. House Tharashk, in particular, has been aggressively cornering the market—it controls the four most prominent agencies in Sharn (*Eberron Campaign Guide*, page 61)—such that its Finder's Guild has become synonymous in the public imagination with inquisitives. For its part, House Medani is content to lurk in the background and provide its services to upper-class clientele. It still views its younger counterpart as a rival, however, and the two houses often compete directly for business.

The dragonmarked houses, especially House Tharashk, maintain their control over the industry by licensing nominally independent inquisitives through their guilds in exchange for annual dues. Few inquisitives are actually dragonmarked heirs, although the master inquisitives who manage the agencies on the guilds' behalf commonly are. These highly coveted

licenses are widely seen as guarantees of professionalism and competency, so they ensure a steady stream of clients. Such licenses also provide an inquisitive with a small measure of protection from enemies as well as ensuring additional resources to draw upon. The houses intensely dislike competition, so they quickly attempt to recruit any promising independents into the guilds. Unless an inquisitive keeps a low profile or has influential connections, refusing a license can have dire consequences for one's career . . . and health.

Inquisitives in Other Settings

Even if a campaign setting doesn't feature inquisitive as a recognizable profession, any world with large cities could conceivably include a few residents who work as private detectives. You can easily adapt the theme to cover a variety of related archetypes if inquisitives don't feel appropriate for your campaign. Here are some suggestions for introducing the inquisitive theme to your game.

Bounty Hunter: Apprehending fugitives who want to stay hidden is difficult, profitable work. A network of dependable informants helps immeasurably, as does a bounty hunter's interrogation skills. Amassing information in this manner and then analyzing the results is one of the best methods bounty hunters have of locating their quarry. The inquisitive theme is an excellent fit.

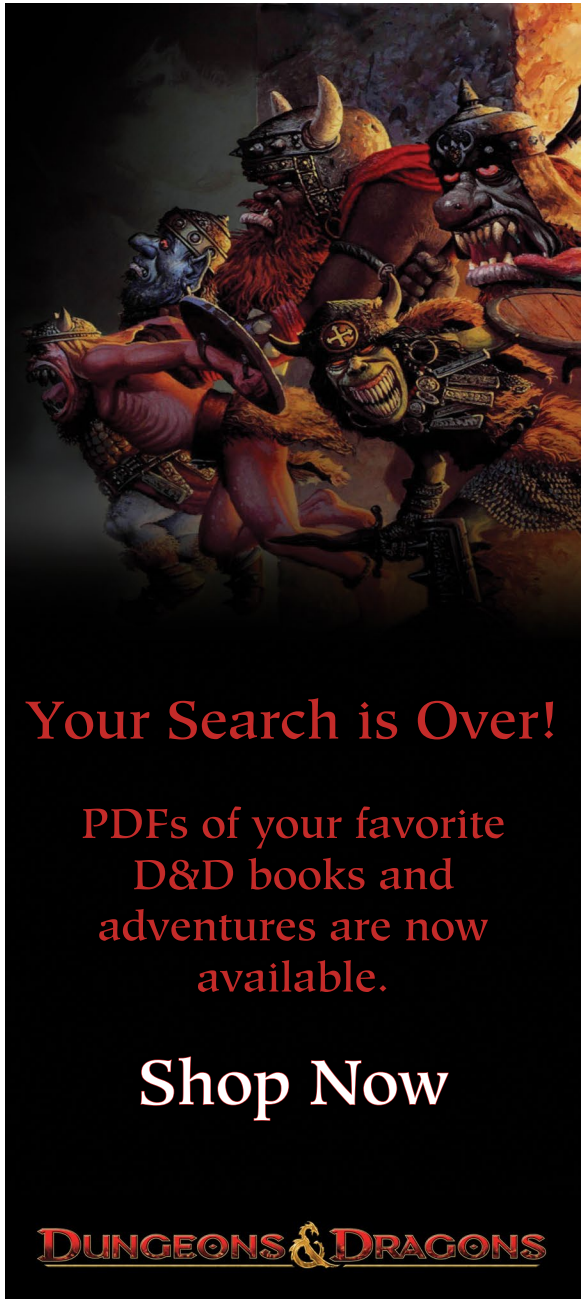
Information Broker: Some well-connected people buy and sell information like any other commodity. Still fewer, such as worshipers of Vecna, regard amassing information as a sacred duty. Knowledge is power, and people pay well for it. The more important or secret the information, the higher a price one can ask for it. Thus, an information broker needs a large network of informants, such as those used by the inquisitive theme, to provide them with their wares.

Journalist: Many D&D® settings, including the Eberron and Forgotten Realms® settings, feature a nascent form of media similar to modern newspapers. Salacious gossip, tales of political intrigue, and crime reporting fill the pages of publications such as Eberron's *Korranberg Chronicle* and the broadsheets of Waterdeep. The venturesome reporters of such news resemble inquisitives in almost every respect.

Law Enforcement: Legally, the task of investigating crimes usually falls to the local constabulary. Large cities might even maintain a dedicated bureau of inspectors who investigate complex or sensitive cases. Mechanically, law enforcement officers can use the inquisitive theme with little adaptation, although they might have additional authority and restrictions within their jurisdictions, such as compelling witness testimony, entering private residences, and making arrests. You can also use the inquisitive theme to model secret police agents, whether they are members of a relatively benevolent group like the King's Citadel of Breland or something more sinister, such as a sorcerer king's templars.

About the Author

Tim Eagon is a freelance writer living in Madison, Wisconsin. He has written several articles, including "Ecology of the Hengeyokai," "Creature Incarnations: Hordelings," and "Ecology of the Swordwing."



Character Themes:
Urban Intrigue

By Alexander Gersh

Illustrations by Jim Nelson and Kieran Yanner

When one is used to exploring dungeons and harsh wilderness settings, a city might seem like a tame place for adventure. Many rangers and druids scoff at their city-dwelling companions, saying that living in such an environment has made them soft. Those who truly know cities, however, understand that they hold perils just as deadly as the most remote haunted forest. These dangers lurk under a façade of sanctuary from the darkness outside.

City dwellers who seek a life of adventure possess skills unique to their cultured backgrounds. Courtiers move among the nobles and rulers of the city, manipulating them in complex political dances. Spies report back to their mysterious masters and engage in secret shadow wars. Vigilantes prowl the streets and rooftops at night, taking justice into their own hands and spreading rumors of their exploits to strike fear into the hearts of evildoers.

With the themes in this article, your character can take part in the drama and politics of urban adventure. Although these themes work best in a campaign set in an urban location, such as Sharn in Eberron or Waterdeep in the Forgotten Realms, they are appropriate for any campaign where the DM wishes to cultivate a sense of intrigue.

Courtier

Most adventurers stick out like a troll among halflings when placed in courtly situations. They see only a bunch of nobles and retainers fawning over one another in incomprehensible ways with little relevance to their lives.

A courtier knows better. A battle rages amid the smiles and niceties of court. Each word is a carefully calculated move, each meeting a play for political power, and each friend another piece in the game of court. A single mistake can mean the difference between acquiring a powerful position and being clapped in irons.

A courtier sees unique solutions to a problem. When confronted by a wicked duke, a typical adventurer might launch an assault on his keep or try to assassinate him. A courtier might instead go to the king and plant the idea that the duke's wicked acts are a political liability. The villainous duke could soon be stripped of his lands and titles, thus ending his threat just as effectively.

Creating a Courtier

Canny adventurers can earn a position at court by using their talents to gain an extra edge. Court wizards are quite common, since their wise counsel and arcane knowledge can prove invaluable to a ruler. Many less scrupulous courtiers choose the path of the rogue to steal secret documents. Bards are frequent visitors in royal circles, and some are intrigued by the games of politics. Even a warlord can hold a position at court after achieving a noteworthy victory. As

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many second-born scions and ambitious merchants can tell you, anyone can gain a place at court with the right connections and skills.

Prerequisite: You must be trained in Diplomacy. The games of court are about winning allies and subtle persuasion, which is impossible without at least some knowledge of the art of diplomacy.

Starting Feature

Master courtiers always seem to know exactly the right thing to say and how others will react before they themselves know. Almost subconsciously, you can present an unassailable position of logic and charm that your rivals fear as much as they do your combat prowess.

Benefit: Whenever you make a Diplomacy check, you can roll twice and take the higher result.

Additional Features

Level 5

Success at court can come from knowing more about your enemies than they know about you. You have learned the art of directing a conversation to manipulate others into revealing more than they intend.

Benefit: Whenever you would make a Bluff check, you can make a Diplomacy check instead.

Level 10

You have developed a network of political connections that gives you privileges and access beyond those of the common person. You can leverage these connections to best use your talents or draw upon them directly to gather information about your rivals. When you're in an unfamiliar place, you can quickly determine whom you need to talk to so that you can learn what you need to know.

Benefit: Whenever you would make a Streetwise check to gather information in a settlement, you can make a Diplomacy check instead.

Optional Powers

Over time, a courtier can expand his or her ability to influence and manipulate others, allowing the courtier to advise allies, convince a foe to lay down arms, or buy some time in a tense situation.

Level 2 Utility Power

After whispering advice into hundreds of powerful ears, you know how to turn a potential failure into an advantage. Wise allies heed your words and benefit from your experience.

Courtier's Cover — Courtier Utility 2

You quickly cover for another's gaffe.

Encounter
Free Action **Personal**
Trigger: While you are able to speak, an ally that you can hear and is within 5 squares of you makes a Diplomacy check and dislikes the result.
Effect: Make a Diplomacy check and use your result in place of the triggering result.

Level 6 Utility Power

Finding someone to listen in the decadent halls of court is one thing, but making them listen in the heat of battle is considerably more difficult. Still, you have mastered the art of convincing beleaguered foes it is in their best interests to lay down arms and survive another day.

Call for Capitulation — Courtier Utility 6

Your words reveal the wisdom of surrender.

Encounter
Free Action **Personal**
Trigger: You would make an Intimidate check to force an opponent to surrender.
Effect: In place of the Intimidate check, make a Diplomacy check with a DC equal to the target's Will defense + 5.

Level 10 Utility Power

Courtiers are very deliberate with each word they say, since a single statement or promise can lead to a dynasty forming or falling. In the heat of battle, one comment can be the difference between life and death. You know just what to say to distract foes for the brief moment it takes to ensure your survival to scheme another day.

Bastion of Words — Courtier Utility 10

A well-timed warning causes your enemies to hesitate.

Encounter
Minor Action **Close** burst 5
Target: Each enemy who can hear and understand you in the burst.
Effect: Make a Diplomacy check against each target's passive Insight. If the check succeeds against a target, the target cannot take actions during your turn until the end of your next turn.

Spy

A secret war is waged in the city—a war of information. On the front line of this war, the spy excels. A city's ruler might retain a network of spies to root out enemies. Ambitious nobles can recruit spies to find new avenues of power. Those who can't maneuver this web of secrets are doomed to failure.

Spies must work carefully amidst potential enemies. A spy can be anyone and no one, spiriting away vital information before disappearing to pursue the

next secret. Drawing suspicion can lead to capture or death. Thus, spies who survive are highly skilled and adapt quickly to their environment. Some are trained in secret academies within the city while others are self-taught. Some hold great loyalty to their patrons while others are purely mercenary. And in the end, spies receive little glory; in fact, the best spies aren't even noticed at all.

Creating a Spy

To do their jobs, spies rely on remaining unsuspected. Bards make excellent spies, since they can easily mingle in all social circles. Wizards and warlocks can also take on this role, using subtle magic to aid them. Some churches even train avengers to act as spies against the enemies of their god. The majority of adventuring spies, however, are rogues; their diverse skills and stealthy natures lend themselves naturally to the needs of the profession.

Starting Feature

The essence of being a spy is to see without being seen. You have a talent for disappearing at a moment's notice, allowing you to observe undetected.

Benefit: You gain the *skulking spy* power.

SPY PATRONS

Spies always report to someone, so work with your DM to choose a patron. Playing a spy representing an important person or organization in the campaign can be a great way to make your character feel tied to the world. You can choose to let the other players know your character's purpose or keep it a secret between you and the DM, creating a deeper sense of intrigue.

Skulking Spy — Spy Utility

You move quickly to escape the notice of your foes.

Encounter
Move Action — **Personal**

Effect: Shift up to your speed. If you have any cover or concealment at the end of this movement, you can make a Stealth check to become hidden.

Additional Features

Level 5

Your work as a spy has sharpened your senses and honed your talent for subterfuge.

Benefit: You gain a +2 power bonus to Bluff checks and Perception checks.

Level 10

You must assume roles that allow you increased access to the information you seek. Doing so requires exact preparation. No one suspects the acolyte who knows prayers or the peasant farmer who knows farming. By rehearsing your cover, you can manipulate others into believing you are who you appear to be, getting them to acknowledge what you should know rather than what you actually know.

Benefit: Whenever you would make a knowledge check while interacting with someone or a Diplomacy check, you can make a Bluff check instead.

Optional Powers

Many spies go beyond their basic training, supplementing their unique skills with the perfect tools: increased perception, flawless cover identities, and the ability to shift blame to others.

Level 2 Utility Power

One slip can be deadly in the spy game. You know how to prevent disaster by quickly coming up with alternative solutions or by redirecting the conversation.

Spy's Recovery — Spy Utility 2

Your fast thinking turns a mistake into an opportunity.

Encounter
Free Action — **Personal**
Trigger: You make a Bluff, Insight, Perception, or Stealth check and dislike the result.
Effect: Reroll the triggering check and use either result.

Level 6 Utility Power

A good spy can evade capture; a great spy can effortlessly shift suspicion to someone else. In combat, you can confuse your foes by suddenly replacing yourself with another creature as the focus of attention.

Sow Confusion — Spy Utility 6

By drawing attention to another, you can slip away.

Encounter
Minor Action — **Personal**
Requirement: At least two creatures must be within 1 square of you and be able to see and hear you.
Effect: Make a Bluff check to create a diversion to hide. If you succeed against one creature within 1 square of you, you succeed against all creatures within 1 square of you. In addition, if you use your *skulking spy* power on the same turn after using this power, that use of *skulking spy* allows you to shift through enemy spaces.

Level 10 Utility Power

You possess such focus that you can hear perfectly through a door, memorize a document from a single glance, or foil a rival who is trying to hide. While this effort is draining, it allows you to obtain information that would otherwise be beyond your abilities.

Spy's Focus Spy Utility 10

You memorize your surroundings for later recall.

Daily
Standard Action **Personal**

Effect: Until the end of the encounter, whenever you make an Insight check or a Perception check, you can roll twice and take the higher result. You can later perfectly recall anything that you sense while this effect persists, such as a skimmed document or the exact wording of a conversation you overheard.

Vigilante

In even the noblest kingdoms, justice can fall by the wayside, and in corrupt or evil ones, villains can often escape fair judgment. Most people stand by and let this pass, but some have a passion for justice that won't submit to impotent laws. These few take personal charge of seeking out evil and punishing it as they see fit. These people are vigilantes.

Vigilantes operate outside the law and therefore must be careful about how they enforce their justice. Many hide their true identities behind simple black masks or more elaborate disguises. They must work at night, out of sight of the city watch and their criminal enemies. They are often forced to travel in unorthodox ways, sprinting over city rooftops or skulking through dark alleys and sewers.

A vigilante's impact goes beyond his or her direct work. Vigilantes know that fear of their vengeance can deter would-be evildoers. So, they use dramatic and flamboyant fighting styles to draw their enemies' attention. Further, they often leave a distinctive token with those they bring to justice, ranging from the symbolic, such as a dead rose, to the gruesome, such as carving their symbol into an enemy's flesh.

The common folk develop strong opinions about vigilantes, sometimes labeling them heroes while fearing them as dangerous criminals at other times. It is up to each vigilante to establish a legacy that is most true to his or her brand of justice.

Secret Identities

Most vigilantes keep their true identities a secret to evade their enemies. If you want to have a secret identity, work with the DM to determine what you would like it to be. Do you always adventure as your vigilante identity or do you sometimes go about as your true self? Do your companions know who you truly are? These character aspects can be exciting hooks for interesting roleplaying.

Creating a Vigilante

Many events can lead a character to become a vigilante. A person might possess a strong desire for justice and be unable to stand idly by while innocents suffer. Another might be avenging a personal loss.

Rogues with a strong moral code might become vigilantes, since they are probably already accustomed to operating outside of the law. Fighters and rangers possess the athleticism that lends itself well to the strain of running over rooftops at night. Avengers are drawn to the path of the vigilante as the executors of their god's will. In the darkest societies, paladins can also become vigilantes due to their rigid moral codes, though they must be careful that the lawless nature of vigilante justice does not lead to their corruption.

Starting Feature

Every vigilante nurtures a sense of the dramatic that tells evildoers a hand of justice is present in the city. Thus, each vigilante develops a signature style. Moves can range from a spinning flourish, leaving distinctive cuts, to etching a symbol into an opponent.

Regardless of the exact nature of your move, it marks your target for justice and strikes fear into your foes.

Benefit: You gain the *mark of the vigilante* power.

Mark of the Vigilante Vigilante Utility

Your signature fighting style unnerves your foes.

Encounter ✦ Fear, Stance
Minor Action **Personal**

Effect: You assume a stance, the mark of the vigilante. Until the stance ends, you gain the following benefits.

- ✦ Whenever you hit an enemy with a melee or ranged attack, you can mark the enemy until the end of your next turn.
- ✦ You gain a +2 power bonus to all defenses against opportunity attacks that you provoke by moving.

Additional Features

Level 5

Word of your exploits travels fast, and the darker elements of the city whisper your name in shadowy alleyways. You can leverage this reputation to strike fear into your foes now that they know exactly who you are and what you are capable of.

Benefit: You gain a +5 power bonus to Intimidate checks against those who recognize you as a vigilante.

Level 10

Your tireless pursuit of justice has required unwavering dedication and faith in yourself. You now possess a determination that is difficult to oppose.

Benefit: You gain a +1 power bonus to your Will defense.

Optional Powers

Some vigilantes deeply commit themselves to their role as the hand of justice in the city. They can escape the authorities by shaking off hindrances or by sprinting over rooftops while getting the drop on their foes through flashy and sudden entrances.

Level 2 Utility Power

A vigilante must constantly remain in motion. Hesitate too long or become entangled in a lengthy fight and the city guard will lock you in a cell or worse. To persevere, you have developed a knack for shrugging off hindrances by focusing your determination and will.

Vigilante Grit Vigilante Utility 2

You draw upon your inner drive to shake off a debilitating effect.

Encounter
Minor Action **Personal**

Effect: Make a saving throw against one effect that a save can end.

Level 6 Utility Power

You keep your foes off balance and strike fast. As you swoop into combat, you attack with a flourish from unexpected quarters.

Dramatic Entrance Vigilante Utility 6

You flamboyantly rush into combat, dazzling your foes.

Daily
Free Action **Personal**
Trigger: You roll initiative.

Effect: You gain a +5 power bonus to your initiative check. Additionally, you gain a +2 power bonus to speed and to attack rolls until the end of the encounter or an enemy acts in the encounter. Until the end of the encounter or until an enemy hits you with an attack, you gain a +2 power bonus to all defenses.

Level 10 Utility Power

You have to be creative to avoid detection when you move about the city. You take to the rooftops, scampering up walls and leaping from building to building.

Roof-Runner Stance Vigilante Utility 10

You move gracefully over and past obstacles that impede your foes.

Daily ✦ Stance
Minor Action **Personal**

Effect: You assume the roof-runner stance. Until the stance ends, you ignore difficult terrain. Additionally, you can climb, balance, and squeeze at full speed rather than at half speed.

About the Author

Alexander Gersh has been playing D&D® since 2nd Edition and has run many home-brewed games. He is excited to present this article as his first published piece.

The Improviser's Cheat Sheet

By Dave Noonan

Illustration by Patrick Thomas Parnell

As every DM knows, players have a knack for asking surprising questions. *What's the bartender's name? What password are the orcs using to get through the gate?*

Players also have a tendency to topple a DM's best-laid plans. *I give the ancient tome to the mysterious stranger. I lift up the grate and escape through the storm sewers.*

Those moments are tests of a DM's ability to improvise, but they're also moments where a little advance preparation can pay big dividends. Every DM wants to glibly provide the bartender's name or effortlessly run a chase sequence through the sewers. But even DMs with decades of experience are occasionally caught flat-footed when the D&D session takes a turn toward the unexpected.

"Preparing to improvise" sounds like a contradiction in terms, but they're really two sides of the same coin. Having some basic building blocks prepared ahead of time lets a DM focus on how to assemble the blocks rather than where to find the blocks in the first place.

One way to prepare to improvise is with a simple "improviser's cheat sheet" that fastens to the inside of a DM screen. The improviser's cheat sheet has a library of names, a map, player backgrounds, improvisation tips, and more—all within a glance so you aren't diverted from rolling dice, providing monster dialogue, and all the other fun parts of being a DM.

The Cheat Sheet

To make an improviser's cheat sheet, take an ordinary sheet of 8.5-inch by 11-inch paper, fold it in quarters,

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and spread it out again. Then grab a writing implement and start your preparation. It'll take about a half-hour to fill out the cheat sheet the first time, but it'll get faster as you mold it to your style of DMing.

Each of the four quadrants has its own purpose. The upper-right quadrant is for names and phrases, the lower-right quadrant is a multipurpose map and flowchart, the lower left is notes about your players, and the upper left is reminders for yourself. With the sheet filled in and clipped to your DM screen, you can improvise with greater confidence because you have some building blocks prepared.

As you make your cheat sheet, keep this tip in mind.

Write Big: It's tempting to try to cram as much information onto the cheat sheet as possible (much like actual cheaters do). Resist that temptation! Improvisation is a timed event, and you don't want to pause while you squint and peer at your cheat sheet. Make sure anything you write on your cheat sheet is clear enough that your eyes effortlessly read it at a glance from your normal DM position and posture. Sacrifice content for instant readability; save all that text for the adventure itself.

You can get easy-to-read text if you assemble the cheat sheet out in a page-layout application, then print it before your session. As you'll see below, you'll mark up the cheat sheet as you play, so plan to revise your cheat sheet and print out a fresh copy every four sessions or so.

Upper-Right Quadrant: Names and Phrases

This quadrant quickly puts an appropriate name or phrase on the tip of your tongue when you need it—whether you're naming the lord regent, a street urchin, the forest south of town, or the command word that summons the djinni. Setting up this quadrant is straightforward; it's just a list of invented words.

To construct this part of the cheat sheet, just make up cool words. After each word, leave a blank, underlined space (more on that below).

As you come up with these names, keep two factors in mind. First, consider pronunciation and the "mouth-feel" of each word. You're the one who has to say it, after all. Second, stick with invented words that don't have a specific connotation and that work for people, places, and things.

"Grathok," for example, is good because "Lord Grathok," "Grathok Forest," and "Grathok, Hammer of the Chainforgers" all work at a moment's notice. "Jonathan" is less useful; it's a fine name for a (probably human) NPC, but not for a place or a thing.

How to Use It: When you're DMing and you get the inevitable "what's the bartender's name?" question, just glance down at the cheat sheet and utter the first name your eye falls on. If you need some magic mumbo-jumbo to describe a ritual or activate a magic item, string two or three of the names together.

Don't browse the cheat sheet for the "best" name, because you want the exchange to be fast and effortless. Trust that you have dozens of suitable names, and when you're improvising, any of them will do.

When you get a little downtime, use the blank space after a name to jot down how you used the name. Now you won't repeat yourself, and you have the information you need if you decide to make the NPC a recurring character. After all, the players were interested enough to ask for a name in the first place.

Variation: If your campaign takes place on the border between two cultures, consider dividing this quadrant in two so that you get names that evoke the correct culture. If you have Gaelic-inspired elves living next to Polynesian-influenced goliaths, you'll want to make sure that the elves get names like "Diannecht" and the goliaths have names like "Kanumako."

Lower-Right Quadrant: Bubble-Map

This quadrant is the easiest to construct. Just clear your mind and draw roughly eight bubbles, each roughly the size of a quarter. Then draw some lines to connect the bubbles in interesting ways. Don't have more than one or two dead-end bubbles, and don't have a bubble that connects to every other bubble. Beyond that, the exact connections don't matter.

What are you actually making? The bubbles are simultaneously a flowchart and a map (and you can make a credible case that a flowchart and a dungeon map are the same thing). You don't know what you're mapping. You don't know what the spaces on your flowchart mean. That's the part you'll improvise at the table—but you'll do so with the structure already in place.

How to Use It: Most of the time, you'll use this as a map for a location the players visit. Square off the corners of the bubbles, add some dungeon dressing, and you have a simple dungeon. Players have a knack for exploring corners of the campaign world that you haven't fleshed out yet, but if you have a bubble map ready to go, you can focus on the content (what's in the bubbles), not structure (how the bubbles connect).

Maybe your bubble map represents the storm sewers that the players are hiding in. Perhaps the bubbles are asteroids floating in a cosmic void of some sorcerer's pocket dimension and the lines are rainbow bridges that connect them.

The bubble map works as an impromptu flowchart, too. Take a few seconds to fill the bubbles with some skills (with DCs from the *Dungeon Master's Guide*) and manipulable elements (like "pull the lever" and "point the lens at the door") and you have a skill challenge for opening a magic portal. Multistep trials and quests (the sorts of things evil witches and angry gods hand out) fit well into the bubble map; your players will have no idea that the "Test of

Moradin" they're undertaking is just some circles and squiggly lines on the back of the DM screen.

Once you have the bubble map in front of you, your DM brain will think up ways to use it. In one campaign alone, bubble maps became a guild's trade routes, the family tree of the ruling dynasty, a pocket dimension within a lich's phylactery, and the only safe routes through the "Trial of Consuming Flame" (and they were all the same bubble map!).

Variation: If you are improvising a particular map detail over and over again, use this quadrant to supply some ready-made map pieces instead. For example, a pirate-themed campaign needs lots of coastline you can draw for the players at a moment's notice. Fill the lower-right quadrant with interesting but broadly useful coastal maps, and you'll be ready when the players' pirate ship skirts the coast to avoid pursuit . . . again.

Lower-Left Quadrant: Character Notes

My players are creatures of habit. They tend to sit in the same seats at the table. So in the lower-left quadrant of my cheat sheet, I have a map of my kitchen table. Every character name is listed at their spot on the table in big text. Below the character name are three lines that serve as reminders of the characters' background, motivations, and long-term goals.

Mapping the table doesn't matter, though—and it won't work if your players seat themselves randomly. What matters is that this quadrant delivers you some basic info about each character. Under each character's name, write three short phrases:

Past: A summary of the player's backstory. "Kicked out of the Black Tower for consorting with devils," for example, or "dedicated himself to Bahamut while imprisoned," or "grew up picking pockets in Waterdeep."

Present: A key like/dislike for the character. This can be epic in scope ("obsessed with the eleven lost swords of Taralis") or mundane ("hates snakes").

Future: An important goal for the character—and preferably an individual goal. Ideally, this should be a medium- to long-term goal rooted in the game world ("seeks the demon cult that kidnapped her sister") or rooted in the game itself ("wants to become a horizon walker" or "desires a holy avenger greatsword").

How to Use It: Unlike the quadrants on the other side of the page, you won't directly reference this quadrant. It works more subtly, serving as a reminder in your peripheral vision of elements that your players want when you're improvising part of the narrative.

When you're making something up on the spot, a quick glance at this quadrant will often give you a way to ground your improvisation in the ongoing story and capture your players' interest.

For example, when you're speaking as the bartender, you might glance at this quadrant and spot "dedicated himself to Bahamut while imprisoned." Improvising quickly, you have the bartender reach for a mug on the top shelf, revealing a prison tattoo on his forearm that the character recognizes. It's a small detail, and you might not even know where it's leading yet, but you've grabbed the attention of that player and everyone feels more grounded in the world.

The other way to use this quadrant is more pragmatic. If you're filling out this quadrant and you don't know what to write for someone, talk to that player! The conversation will help the player define his or her character and give you ammunition for future improvising.

Variation: I've played in games that extensively used individual quests to drive the story forward, build constructive intraparty tension, and deliver the bulk of the campaign's XP. This quadrant would be a perfect place to keep track of those quests. More broadly, if you're doing anything that requires individual attention for each player, use this quadrant to make that job easier.

Upper-Left Quadrant: Your Coach

Being a DM is a performing art, but you don't have a director or producer to coach you and help you hone your skills. That's where the final quadrant comes in. It's a place for you to give yourself reminders that improve your improvisations—and your DMing skills in general.

When you construct this part of your cheat sheet, imagine that you have a coach who can whisper advice in your ear while you're DMing. In this quadrant, write the script for that coach. Write down three or four key ideas that you want to have in mind throughout the session. Write these ideas even bigger than the other text on your cheat sheet; you want this advice in your brain every few minutes while you're playing.

Every DM has different strengths and weaknesses, so every DM wants different advice. Here are some reminders I've put on my improviser's cheat sheet in the past.

Never Negate: This is an old bit of improvisational theater wisdom. It's easy for DMs to say "no" when a player wants to try something outlandish, ill-advised, or impossible—and that leads to a dead end. A "yes, and . . ." response often leads to more interesting improvisations.

Let Them Fail Forward: I grabbed this notion from indie RPG designer Luke Crane. One of the fundamental things every DM does dozens of times every session is describe a failed attack or check. Rather than the default "you failed, and nothing happens" answer, you can describe a "fail forward" situation where the players achieve success but with bad consequences they weren't anticipating.

For example, say a character fails an Intimidate check against the vizier. It's easy to say that the vizier

is unimpressed. But it's probably more fun to improvise a fail-forward situation: "The vizier's eyes roll back into his head and he faints from fright. Now you're in the throne room with an unconscious vizier at your feet, and you hear footsteps approaching. What do you do?"

Give the Players the Sun and Make Them Fight for the Moon: RPG blogger Jeff Rients gets credit for this one. It's a reminder that an improvisational DM can afford to be generous. You will never run out of monsters or threats. If the players want a flying astral war galley, give it to them. Then bring on a horde of astral dreadnoughts.

Add History: Another trick from improvisational theater, this phrase is a reminder to connect improvisations to the campaign's backstory. The difference between "the northern barbarians are getting restless" and "the northern barbarians are getting restless . . . again" is huge. Savvy players will jump on the clue you just dropped and ask, "What happened last time? Can we stop them the same way?"

Raise the Stakes: The D&D rules are a big matrix of risks and rewards, but the story behind your game should have risks and rewards, too. Whenever you're improvising something, use the opportunity to increase the risk or difficulty, increase the reward, or both.

The master of the thieves' guild could say, "Break into the lord's manor and steal the key to the vault." But it's more memorable if you add " . . . and I'll give you the antidote to the poison you just consumed" (increased reward) or " . . . and if the lord doesn't notice the missing key, I'll hire you for the vault job" (increased difficulty and increased reward).

"When in Doubt, Have a Man Come Through the Door with a Gun in His Hand:" Raymond Chandler never played D&D, but his advice serves as a reminder to be alert for moments when interest among the players is waning. That's the opportunity to improvise, and you don't need to be elaborate. Have a bad guy kick in the door, get the players involved, and then start improvising how the assault connects with the larger tale.

How to Use It: Like the character notes quadrant, this part of the cheat sheet is intentionally passive. Just get the advice into your peripheral vision and let the reminders flit through your brain as you're playing.

This quadrant is more demanding, however, when it comes time to update your cheat sheet. Updating the three other quadrants is straightforward; you make new quadrants when you've used up the info on your existing cheat sheet. Knowing when to change up the advice from your imaginary "coach" requires some thoughtful assessment of how you want to improve as an improviser and a DM.

Variation: The coaching above is focused on the improvisational and storytelling parts of the DM's art, but if you desire reminders in another aspect of DMing, this is a good place for them.

For example, when I first started DMing 4th Edition D&D, I would always forget to make the recharge roll for monsters. For about a month, my northwest quadrant had "ROLL FOR RECHARGE, YOU BIG DUMMY" in block letters. It all depends on what you want your coach to whisper in your ear.

Make It Work for You

The cheat sheet works best when used moderately. You may need to force yourself to consult the sheet periodically until quick glances at it become second nature. Or you may find yourself pausing frequently to browse the ideas you've written down. Strive for a middle ground where you're using the improviser's cheat sheet neither too little nor too much.

And at risk of repetition, make sure you can read your own words. Nothing kills an improviser's cheat sheet faster than small text. Write less if you have to—"big" is better than "more."

Make it your own! There's nothing mandatory about the four quadrants outlined above. Individualize the cheat sheet to give you the building blocks you need instantaneously. If you're running an Egyptian-themed game and often need to spontaneously write hieroglyphics, devote a quarter of the cheat sheet to that.

After you've used the cheat sheet a few times, you'll have a strong sense of which parts are essential for you and which parts need modification or replacement. As long as your cheat sheet is giving you at-a-glance building blocks for your own improvisations, then the effort you took to construct it is worthwhile.

Your efforts are worthwhile in another way, too. By constructing the cheat sheet, you prime your own creative engine. After you have all those building blocks floating around your head, you'll find improvisation comes easier, with or without a cheat sheet.

About the Author

David Noonan designed dozens of 3rd Edition and 4th Edition D&D products. By day, he plays games when he's not writing. By night, he writes when he's not playing games.

* Never Negate
* Fail Forward
* Give the Sun, Fight for the Moon
* Add History
* Raise the Stakes

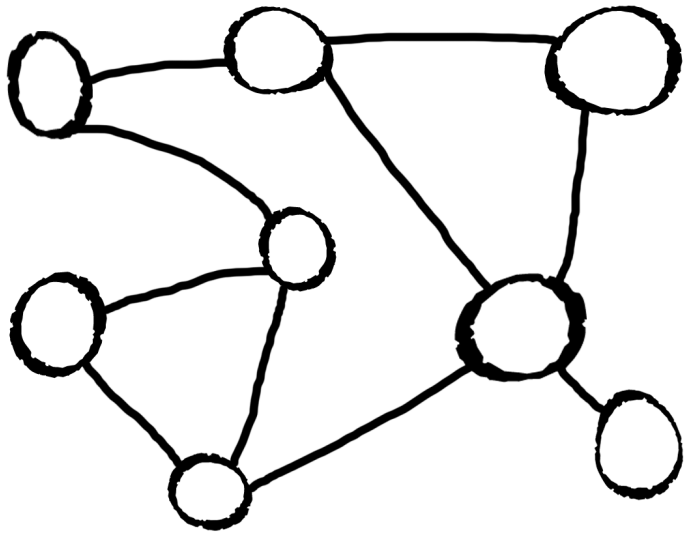
Garthak	Eldoram
Mishol	Ranfald
Adalric	Ruggierox
Kundegund	Hervek
Medwin	Jadrik
Wargar	Gillemfro
Hentyr	Geoffrert
Burghalic	Fritamun
Chalmriz	Alrigo
Eldrija	Dalric

Alarica
* Escaped mines
  - Slavers
  + Justice
* Destroy the slave kingdom

Norvin
* Sailed f. South
  - Pirates
  + Money/Finery
* Run his own merchant ship

Orlanthe
* Raised on streets
  - Nobility
  + Thieves guild
* Bring down Duke Winfryd

Verena
* Library/Walgren
  - Evil clerics
  + ancient books
* Discover true history of Elgarnia



FORGOTTEN REALMS®

ED GREENWOOD'S
Eye on the Realms

Bold Folk of Baldur's Gate

By Ed Greenwood

Illustration by Chris Seaman

The Lower City of Baldur's Gate is its breathing, beating heart. This steep-sided bowl of crammed houses and shops descends from the Upper City on the seaward side and the Outer City on the landward side to the foul-smelling, noisy, always bustling docks.

Most writings about "the Gate" deal with its high and mighty, or those rising to power. But what of the shopkeepers, the salthands (dock loaders), the finehands (artisans), and the folk of the streets? Presented here are three of the more colorful "just plain folks" who do the bulk of the daily work in the city. Characters who are unlucky—or less than careful—may encounter any of these individuals, or others like them, in the streets of the Lower City.

Boldraven

All who live in and around the Gate know the name of this famous citizen, even if they haven't actually met him. Most Baldurians regard him affectionately as a "living treasure" of the city, though the person who first gave him that moniker has long since faded into obscurity.

Properly named Delnur Bolraedren, this jovial, garrulous, and legless former adventurer is known to all as "Boldraven." His black hair, black skin, and burly upper body give him a forbidding appearance, but his tendency to joke and chat with anyone nearby puts new acquaintances at ease. Boldraven spent his adventuring days on mainland Faerûn; despite rumors to the contrary, he was never a seagoing pirate.

Boldraven is happy to relate the tale of how he lost his legs—a misfortune that befell him while he was earning good coin as a caravan guard. Thieves out of the night struck a caravan that Boldraven was helping to guard on its overland journey from Baldur's Gate to Amn, and breached a crate on one of the wagons. The many-tentacled, many-jawed creature within the crate promptly broke their bodies and started devouring not just the thieves, but everyone nearby in camp. Boldraven and others fought it—but it took some killing, and was busily trying to

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eat Boldraven alive when it finally expired. By then, both of his legs were gone, up to mid-thigh. A priestess of Sharess took enough of a fancy to him to save his life with her spells—a part of the story to which Boldraven always adds leering embellishments.

Boldraven has no idea exactly what sort of monster was in the crate, or who was shipping it from Baldur's Gate to Athkatla or points beyond, but he is happy to speculate. If paid enough, he can make up almost any sort of tale about it.

After the battle that deprived Boldraven of his legs, he spent several years begging in the streets of the Gate. This precarious existence was bolstered with occasional short hires as a bilge cleaner—wherein he was literally lowered into the bilges of a ship to kill rats and claw out muck. Boldraven's shortened length allowed him to turn around while crawling in cramped, half-flooded spaces where other adults couldn't maneuver. Children or halflings who matched his size lacked his strength and vicious rat-fighting (and sometimes octopus-fighting) skills.

Then one day, his life changed when he aided a desperate wizard. According to Elminster, Boldraven was asleep on the streets one night when the mage Rordren of Neverwinter, fleeing from mercenaries hired to relieve him of an enchanted orb, thrust it down Boldraven's filthy breeches and begged him to hide it until Rordren could return. Boldraven did so, despite seeing the unfortunate Rordren run down, beaten senseless, stripped and searched, then dumped in the river to drown. A priestess of Umberlee happened to witness the beating and rescued the mage in return for a service to her temple. When Rordren found Boldraven again and the legless man freely returned the orb, the grateful mage gifted him with a *belt of flying* that restored his mobility. The two still remain friends, and Rordren happily takes revenge on anyone who "messes with" Boldraven.

With the belt, Boldraven can swoop around the streets (and occasionally in and out of bedchamber windows by night) as a floating torso.[1] He now makes his living inspecting and repairing roofs, hanging and repainting overhead signs and banners, and refilling the high-mounted oil lamps of many Lower City businesses. But he still hungers for adventure, so occasionally—just occasionally—Boldraven aids those who pay him handsomely by spying from aloft at night, opening windows and hatches, and dropping flowerpots on the heads of guards.

Mulgur Wottyns

Not many traders in the Lower City can claim to be city "fixtures" or "institutions," known to merchants up and down the Sword Coast and recommended freely by many. But fat, ugly, stubble-jowled Mulgur Wottyns—known as "Mulgur Manygoods"—is just such a trader.

Mulgur has an amiable disaster of a face, covered with warts and sporting a flattened, many-times-broken nose. The skin on one side of his face sags to almost close one eye, and he's missing more than a few teeth.

Some say that Mulgur's facial injuries resulted from a former life as a dangerous adventurer or mercenary. In truth, however, he was just a young sailor who drank too much ashore, got into brawls, and fought poorly. Over the years, thanks to his diligent patronizing of alehouses, Mulgur's capacity for strong drink—even poisoned potables—has increased until he can now brush off the effects of amounts that drive most humans to the cobbles, senseless.

Despite his appearance, Mulgur is an affable sort, often chuckling or humming to himself. Street children regard him as a huggable friend and protector. In fact, perhaps a dozen street children at a time call the boats in the rafters of Mulgur's shop their beds and look upon him as an uncle. Some are always watching over him, so anyone dealing—or even just talking—with Mulgur is under surveillance by three or more pairs of eyes. No one steals from Mulgur unnoticed—or goes unfollowed.

Mulgur specializes in selling odd things, such as two dozen matched throwing knives, or ladies' gowns that glow upon command, or ropes with skillets tied to them at regular intervals, or cloth padding to be belted onto a body under clothing so as to alter its shape in a spectacular fashion. Furthermore, he routinely buys even odder merchandise—discreetly and with no questions asked. In fact, Mulgur is the busiest fence (buyer of stolen goods) in the Gate, and the only one who handles "impossible to shop" items, such as temple regalia, silverware, and other items emblazoned with the arms or badges of Upper City families. He has contacts among the less scrupulous caravan merchants, as well as at least three shady, local semi-retired adventuring bands.

Like any other successful merchant, Mulgur buys low and sells high, but "after all, a trader must stay in business,"as he says.[2] His crammed shop has a distinctive signboard that juts out over the street, depicting a gape-mouthed shark graven with the legend "Wottyns Curios And More." The shop is a powerful lure for someone needing a disguise in a hurry, or some oars, or a tiny open boat—or even a dozen sound, tight, clean empty barrels. Need old but sturdy crates large enough to hold a person (with or without a concealed, built-in metal cage)? Or elegant boots that make their wearer a handwidth taller? How about a codpiece that comes with its own clip-fitted interior vial for potion, lotion, or strong drink? Mulgur's your man.

He long ago paid handsomely to have his shop protected by strong firequench magics, to prevent arson. A recent incident involving an outlander wizard, a street brawl, and an errant *fireball* gave ample proof that those defenses are still functioning.

Jalythe of the Two Beholders

Jalythe, the crazed mage, argues often with herself, usually in fierce whispers.[3] Her utterances are peppered with irrelevant phrases from her magical book learning and—alarmingly, to many nearby—from incantations.

Her condition results from the fact that long ago, Jalythe successfully cast a mindspeak eye tyrant spell of her own devising—twice. As a result, she is literally of two minds. Her mistake was not realizing that she had succeeded the first time. When Jalythe did the second casting and successfully contacted the mind of a second beholder, it sought to mentally dominate her. It easily overwhelmed her, because the first beholder (who up until then had refused to respond to her, and was just mentally "listening" to her entreaties) chose that moment to try the same tactic.

The two eye tyrants didn't know each other, and they still lurk in lairs geographically far apart in Faerûn. The first beholder whose mind Jalythe contacted was an old, cunning, scarred, but monstrously large eye tyrant, Xyxroldor (YICK-zz-ROLL-dor) by name. It lurks in the darkest, deepest places of the Wealdath, in a lair that includes cavern networks connected to the Underdark. Xyxroldor rules these areas ruthlessly, guarding them with a menagerie of monsters it controls mentally. It intends to dominate northern coastal Tethyr (ignoring the Velen peninsula), then spread its influence (stealthily and with elegant care, so as to remain publicly unnoticed) into coastal Amn, which someday it will also rule.

The second beholder in Jalythe's mind is Urlorlthrekular (Earl-orl-thh-WRECK-yoo-lar), "the Eyes of Doom"—a brown-bodied, crimson-eyed southern beholder that lairs in the Wyrmbones. This eye tyrant spends most of its attention on what its dozen or so mind-controlled agents—primarily human adventurers and traveling merchants—see while they range over all Faerûn doing its bidding. Urlorlthrekular delights in shattering the plots and schemes of petty tyrants (rulers, local governing officials, overambitious guildmasters, ruthless heads of thieving cabals, and the like), and in corrupting courtiers everywhere to increase its own influence in governments from one end of Faerûn to the other.

Jalythe's mind has become a battleground for these two beholders, where they deepen a feud with each other. Caught between the eye tyrants, the "Madwits Mage" (as Baldurians call her) struggles to control her own body and utterances, as well as her life. While asleep or unconscious, Jalythe is merely a befuddled spectator to her unwanted guests' mental battles. But when she is awake, she's like unto a child's toy ball, being mind-kicked, grabbed, thrown, and dragged to and fro inside her own mind. At such times, Jalythe staggers around the streets, often convulsing and even going to the cobbles to curl up, while gasping out or muttering her random protests and garbled words. Baldurian authorities have learned to leave her alone, because when confronted with violence or firm restraint, she may lash out with deadly spells that should be far beyond her capabilities (magic the beholders are channeling through her).

Elminster knows little of Jalythe's past, beyond the obvious facts that she's highly intelligent and has a gift for the Art. Her manners and stylish clothes give testament to her good breeding, and the long sequence of expensive tutors who trained her in the Art, as well as the rare substances she once used in her spell experiments, show that she did not lack for wealth. It is also clear that she has no kin in the city, and no relatives nearby who know of her state or care about her.

As time passes, Jalythe is increasingly mastering control of her body despite her two warring "guests," and she may soon reach out to adventurers or others to help rid her of the eye tyrants. In Elminster's opinion, such a cure is likely to involve some dangerous and drastic task.

Notes

1. Some say Boldraven is the most notorious "comforter of widows and lonely lasses" in all Baldur's Gate. (Elminster doesn't disagree, but merely points out that the man has competition for this, er, honor.)

2. One of Mulgur's favorite sayings. Others include "Found somewhere, has a past, but cries out to be yours, now!" and "What are mere coins before such life-enriching usefulness?" and "The gods know I speak truth!" and "Fair deals and hard bargains—and for you, a little more!"

3. Jalythe is pronounced "JALL-ith" ("jall to rhyme with "hall"), and her full name is Jalythe Malaekyn Indurwood.

About the Author

Ed Greenwood is the man who unleashed the Forgotten Realms® setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, plus he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which space remains to pile up more papers.

COMING NEXT MONTH

MONSTERS OF THE LOST WORLD

By Aeryn "Blackdirge" Rudel

Dinosaurs have been a staple of Dungeons & Dragons from the beginning, but dinosaurs make up only a tiny fraction of the dizzying array of behemoths that stomped across our planet over eons past. This article brushes away the dust of ages and reveals three groups of primordial beasts that lived either long before the rise of dinosaurs or long after their extinction.

CHANNEL DIVINITY: NERULL

By Jon Green

Compared to most dead gods, Nerull still has a surprisingly large following, though those followers are still rarely encountered. Worship of the dead god typically involves leading a double life, as public adulation of Nerull would likely lead to death or exile.

CODEX OF BETRAYAL: LEVISTUS

By John "Ross" Rossomangno

Framed for the murder of Asmodeus's consort Bensozia, Levistus was stripped of his title as Ruler of the Fifth and imprisoned in an iceberg adrift in the frigid waters of Stygia. But, as he watched Geryon rule over his former realm, the entombed archdevil schemed and hatched a plan born of unimaginable patience.

THE SUNDERING: TO RULE TWO WORLDS

By Ed Greenwood

As Abeir and Toril move apart, there are a few fell entities who seek to rule parts of both worlds, and maintain (or create anew) linkages between the two worlds so they can move back and forth between them. A handful of heroes have discovered these ambitious evils and seek to thwart them, but they need help—and fast.

AND MORE!